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Rifle Ranch

He was the target for every gun in town!



LINCOLN DREW

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**"Ride out...
or die!"** Ed Loren sneered.

And Duffy Rincon had no choice. The odds were seven against one.

Even as Duffy moved away, a shot brushed his face, another nicked his boot heel. Duffy whirled and fired. Loren screamed and crumpled to the dust, his skull open to the sun.

No one looked at Duffy as he walked away. They were staring at the body of what had been Arizona's ace gun. Loren would never throw down on another waddy, but Duffy knew there would be others to take his place—plenty!

Also by Lincoln Drew

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LINCOLN DREW

**RIFLE
RANCH**



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RIFLE RANCH

PERMABOOK edition published September, 1958
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RIFLE RANCH

Chapter 1

THE BIG TEXAN tasted the mud. Face down, lying as if dead. Not quite face down, for his head was turned a little so that a corner of his mouth sucked at the sharp Arizona air; it smelled of spring, and the morning rain would be good for the grass. The waves of sound still roared through his head as if he had been too close to a tremendous gong struck suddenly without warning. Instinct, however, told him it had been a gunshot, not a gong. His head was clearing a little now and he was vaguely aware of other sounds.

"Dead as last night's beer," a voice said.

If it was the woman he had been talking to, her voice had changed perceptibly in a few seconds. Deeper now, not soft. You were off your guard when talking to a pretty woman. Especially since you had been longer in the saddle from Texas than you wanted to remember. Cold grub and hard ground for sleeping, and then you saw the woman. The rain had soaked her cheap green dress so that it was pressed against her. You felt the old stirrings, for it was spring, and despite what a man had hired himself out to do, he could take a moment to admire beauty.

She was a woman who wanted to explain that her husband wasn't nearly so bad as he had been pictured. And you trying to understand like a fool. Forgetting all the warnings about the man you had come to deal with, Kyle Kell. And while Kyle Kell's wife talked pretty and let you look at her, you kept your weary seat in the saddle and forgot what might be behind you in the thicket beside the road.

"I was on my way to the Rifle Creek Ranch," the woman had said. "I was hoping you'd be there. But my horse balked in the storm. I'm stranded."

It was an ancient bay horse standing stolidly in the shafts of a decrepit buggy.

You swung down and selected several pebbles. Then you were back in the saddle. You rode to the bay horse and dropped the pebbles in an ear and with a buckskin thong, tied the ear. When the bay shook his head, the rattling pebbles would take his mind off the load he had balked at pulling along the muddy road.

You had been about to tell the woman that this was an old Texas treatment for a balky horse. You reined toward her and the shot had come from the thicket. From the back.

Now the woman cried, "You've killed him, Ed!"

Yes, it was the woman's voice, no mistake about that. But who was this Ed? She was Mrs. Kyle Kell, wife of the man who ramrodded the Mountain Ranch of Skull for Randolph Middleton II of Chicago.

The man lying in the mud tried to remember the rest of it. A small voice from the turmoil of his mind said, You're Duffy Rincon. You've come here to be foreman of the Rifle Creek Ranch of Skull. Your last opportunity for success. You're thirty years old and there won't be another chance to snag your loop on the big one. Just three years, you figured, then you'd have enough to go back to Texas and brand your own cows. Four thousand dollars a year, Randolph Middleton II had offered you. Plus twenty per cent of the beef you shipped. Such a fantastic offer from a scared little man who had inherited a cattle empire from an uncle; a little man who didn't have the guts to come to northern Arizona and fire the man he felt sure was stealing from him.

But there were no dreams now, Duffy Rincon, the voice in his mind told him. This was death. The man said you were "dead as last night's beer." And the woman said, "You've killed him, Ed!" So this was the death everybody feared. This was what they felt when the last bullet crashed into chest or skull.

"I'll put another bullet in him for luck," Ed said, his voice thick as if he might be drunk.

"Oh, God, haven't you done enough! Look at his head!" The woman began to weep.

"They say he's tough," the man called Ed said, slurring his words. "A real tough Texas ramrod." The sneer was in the

voice now as if this Ed didn't think Duffy Rincon had been tough at all.

Had been? That was past tense, as if you considered yourself dead. But how could you suck in air through one corner of your mouth not buried in the mud? And now be aware of pain in your head instead of the roaring; a gong of pain now not of sound.

"No, Ed!" the woman screamed. "No!"

"Just one for luck, Suella."

"He's dead, can't you see that? Look at his head."

There was further argument.

Then the woman said, "You're drunk or you wouldn't have done such a despicable thing. How could you shoot him when his back was turned?"

"Easy, honey," Ed said. "You just come up quiet when you see him talkin' to a good-looker like you. And he's so damn full of thinkin' what every man thinks when he looks at you, that he don't hear a thing."

"You followed me out here!" Suella Kell accused.

"Hell, no, honey. I just happened by. When this Rincon didn't come in on the stage today, I went by Casson's Store. Done a little drinkin'. Then I got to thinkin' this Rincon might already be down at Rifle Creek Ranch. I was on my way to take a look."

"Ed, let's get out of here."

"Just one for luck, Suella."

"I--I'll let you ride me home." There was a strained promise in her voice.

There was silence, and at last Ed said, his breathing a little hard, "All right, but I'll take his gun an' rifle. He won't need 'em." Then he added, "I still figure I oughta put one in him for luck."

"Don't do it. I'll never have anything to do with you again." The buggy started to move.

"You got as much chance of stayin' away from me as a cow has from spring grass." The arrogant laugh again. "So long, Mex."

"He doesn't look Mexican," the woman said. "Not with that red hair and blue eyes."

"He's got a Mex name," Ed said sharply. "Rincon." Then his voice was teasing. "Good thing I come by when I did. If you got close enough to see his eyes are blue, there's no tellin' what might've happened next. Hell, me an' Kyle are damn jealous of our woman."

"Stop it, Ed! You make me sound like a—"

Then the voices were too far away and all Duffy could hear were the faint sounds of hoofbeats and buggy wheels. He lay for a long time because this dirty bushwhacker named Ed might look back and see him move. Then nothing the woman could say would keep him from emptying his gun.

Finally the shock wore off and he could move the tip of a finger, then a leg. He sat up. The pain was so intense that the world uptilted and he found himself on his back again. Above him the stormy sky was shredded by wind. A finger of sunlight poked through the clouds and fell upon his face. The warmth of the sun was the most wonderful thing he had ever experienced. To feel the sun again on your face. To clench your hands; never mind that your fingers dug up gouts of Arizona mud.

"I'm alive," he said. "Alivel"

His hair, under a soggy hat, was the dark red of a spring sunset when color is flung against a skyline cloudbank. His nose jutted like a wedge of mountain rock in the center of a strong brown face. There was the unmistakable mark of Texas on him, in the spread of shoulders under a muddy brush jacket, the length of leg in worn canvas pants.

Finally he made it to his feet, his head throbbing like an open wound. He remembered the shot, two of them, in fact. The first smashing into his horse as he reined it suddenly toward the woman in the buggy. The horse dying under him. And then, as he fell sideways out of the saddle, the second shot striking him in the head. Already flies had swarmed in around the dead horse. Above the rimrock to the north he saw the lazy spiraling of two buzzards.

The pain was localized now, above his right ear. Lifting a forefinger, he half-expected to find that the skull had been laid open and that if he probed too deep he would feel the

spongy surface of his own brain. But all he found was a furrow ripped through flesh.

He lurched to his feet, looking around for his rifle. Then he remembered Ed had taken it along with his revolver. As he started walking he could see far to the north the Ramparts reaching toward the sky with crooked fingers of stone. Up there someplace was the Mountain Ranch of Skull. There he would find Kyle Kell. Maybe he'd find this man called Ed.

Much closer than the Mountain Ranch, however, was a place called Casson's Store, a trading post ten miles west of the town of Packer. The map Randolph Middleton II had drawn for him when they had their talk in Anchor, Kansas, was firmly implanted in his mind. To his right was Rifle Creek. All he had to do was follow this north to Casson's Store.

Twenty yards from the scene of the ambush he came suddenly upon a carbine wedged into a crotch of mesquite. A spare grin cracked the brown skin of his bloodied, mud-spattered face. He snatched up the weapon, saw that it was loaded. The grin had cost him, for it started the pain shooting through his skull again.

"They want fight," he said aloud as he swung the carbine under his arm, "they'll get fight."

He did not question his luck at finding the carbine, nor did he dwell upon the fact that the weapon was dry when there had been a hard rain that morning.

As he walked, the pain eased. He knew he must cover his tracks if possible. This Ed might get to thinking things over when there wasn't a warm-eyed woman to sway his judgment and come back with more men. When they found him gone, they'd track him sure as sunrise.

Chapter 2

SKULL RANCH, owned by Randolph Middleton II, was in reality two spreads, the Mountain Ranch, ramrodded by Kyle Kell, and the ranch at Rifle Creek, which was to be operated by Duffy Rincon. Duffy had full power to fire Kell if he found evidence that the man was stealing. This seemed to be a mere formality, for Middleton seemed certain that there was Skull beef being sold by Kell that never appeared on the books. With Kell out of the picture, Duffy would take over both ranches. At the time it had seemed like an ideal arrangement.

Duffy had arrived not by stage, as everyone expected, but by horseback. He had intended moving slowly to get the feel of things. But he had not even had a chance to reach Rifle Creek Ranch and look over his new home or meet the crew there. Instead, he had run into Mrs. Kyle Kell and that Ed.

His strength returned, for he was young and strong. Not young in years, perhaps, but strong. He had worked hard all his life and just at thirty, when he began to wonder if the big dream was too elusive for Duffy Rincon, he had met Middleton. Duffy, as foreman of a Texas spread that was nearly bankrupt due to the shortsightedness of eastern owners, was trailing the last herd north to the shipping point at Anchor, Kansas. There he met Randolph Middleton II. Middleton had come down from Chicago, looking for a man he could trust. He made inquiries and decided on Duffy. They made their deal and signed papers drawn up by a lawyer. Then Duffy had gone back to Texas to quit his job. When this formality was over with, he rode north and west to this far corner of Arizona.

And the day I arrive I look too long at a woman and nearly die for it, Duffy thought.

He cut now through the brushy tangle that lay east of the road, following the creek, bank to bank now with runoff from the hills. Luck favored him at last. It started to rain again, washing out his tracks. And he knew that unless this Ed could track like an Indian he was comparatively safe.

He came at last to Casson's Store, where they said a man could buy pleasure or a gun or a fast horse. The price was high but the towering owner of the place, Mike Casson, was known to have a closed mouth.

It was twilight, and a single lamp burned on the back bar. Duffy studied a thickly built giant of a man behind a bar deep in the store. They said Mike Casson was the only living thing with a human scent that was big as a grizzly and just as tough. Casson was leaning over his bar, talking to a dainty little man wearing a bowler hat.

When Duffy entered, both men turned to look at him. In the glow of lamplight Duffy could see that the big man's face was covered with small scars.

The big Casson suddenly brought up a sawed-off shotgun and said, "Don't try to use that rifle in here, friend."

Duffy halted halfway in the store and held the rifle away from his body. He was so tired he could hardly stand after the long hike through the rain. He was soaked. His head felt big as a barrel; every muscle in his long body ached as if he had fought a bucking horse for a dozen hours straight. He was covered with mud, his face and head bloodied.

"I need whisky and food," Duffy said. He passed coils of new rope, bolts of cloth, sacks of meal. Saddles hung on pegs. Everything was covered with dust. Near the bar were a half-dozen deal tables. To the right of the bar a stairway led to the second floor. There was the mounted head of a grizzly on the wall beside the stairway.

Casson's pale gray eyes, embedded deep in a massive skull, studied him. He put away the shotgun and set out bottle and glass.

"You're Rincon," Casson said. "I was in Rincon, Texas, right after the war. You was ramrod for the Rail 7."

Duffy said nothing. The whisky was like a hot fist in the pit of his stomach. Duffy tossed a double eagle toward the

bar to pay for the drink, but it fell short of its intended mark.

The little man in the bowler hat scampered after the rolling coin that finally clattered against a cuspidor.

Casson said, "Hand it over, Billy."

The little man giggled and passed over the coin. Tiny feet in pointed black shoes showed from the bottoms of pants of California cloth. His shirt was of pink silk. Jerking a thumb at Casson, Billy Rooley said, "Mike here wouldn't trust his own mother with a nickel beer."

"I sure as hell wouldn't trust you with a penny's worth of ice off the creek," Casson said. He looked at Duffy's head. "You meet a black bear on the trail?"

"A bear named Ed. A dirty bushwhacker. Know anybody named Ed?"

"Kyle Kell's got a segundo at Mountain Ranch named Ed Loren."

"That doesn't surprise me," Duffy said sourly. "I came out here to take over Rifle Creek Ranch for Middleton."

"Yeah, so I heard." Casson rubbed his jaw. He would top Duffy by a good four inches and Duffy was six feet tall. Casson probably weighed out at ten pounds over two-fifty. Around the high cheekbones and the mouth that was like a slit in soft leather were small scars. "I always wondered," Casson said, giving Duffy his change. "Were you named for the town of Rincon? Or was the town named after you?"

"Does it matter?"

Casson chuckled. "Kell's goin' to feel almighty foolish after all his stewin'. He thought you were Mex. On account of your name. Middleton wrote you was comin' out."

"What's the matter with being a Mexican?" Duffy demanded.

Casson held up a big hand in a gesture of protest. "I ain't tryin' to hooraw you. Just seems funny that a gent with Irish red hair and blue eyes has got a Mex name."

"A man takes the name given him," Duffy said. "If he's a man, he's not ashamed of it."

"I got a few Mex friends myself," Casson said. "Got a Mex gal workin' here, as a matter of fact." Casson seemed to debate a matter with himself, then said, "I hate Kyle Kell's guts."

"A man hates for a reason."

"I tried to do business with him." The mouth in the scarred face tightened. "I been waitin' for you to show up, Rincon, ever since I heard Middleton was sendin' out somebody to ramrod Rifle Creek. You and me could do business."

Duffy knew what he was talking about. "I'm not a cow thief," Duffy said.

"Why else would a man come out to this last knot on the rope if he didn't figure to make his stake? I know them rich gents like Middleton. They don't pay a man like you enough. They want it all." Casson let that sink in, then went on, "I've heard about you, Rincon. You never lost a herd on the Kansas drive. You know the business. There's money here."

"I'm getting well paid for the job I'm going to do for Middleton. I won't steal his beef."

Casson smiled. "You deal with me when you do. Me and Billy here"—he nodded at the diminutive Rooley—"will get you a lot more for the beef you sell than Kell ever got for his."

Billy Rooley shifted his dainty feet. "You'd do well to think that over, Rincon."

"Billy, go call that gal," Casson said. "The one you brought up from Tucson. What's her name—"

"Soccorro."

"A hell of a name for a woman," Casson grunted.

Duffy looked down at the little man, his eyes cold. "So you deal in other things besides cattle."

"A gent makes a dollar where he can," Rooley said. He called: "Soccorro!" and in a moment a dark-skinned girl with a red paper rose in her black hair came down the stairs.

She peered into the room, saw Duffy, and said in Spanish, "Can I be of service, Señor?"

Casson cut in with, "Billy, why can't you at least bring me a gal that speaks English?"

"You said you wanted a Mex gal," Billy Rooley said. "You said havin' a Mex gal here would rile Kyle Kell."

Duffy said to Casson, "Can she find a bandage for my head and cook me something to eat?"

"She'll even do more than that for you, Rincon."

Duffy walked over to the waiting girl and said in Spanish,

"Tonight I am not a man, Señorita." He touched the gash on his head. "You can help me?"

The dark eyes in the plump face were instantly understanding. She nodded and hurried up the stairs.

When Duffy started after her, Casson held out a hand that seemed big as a skillet. "That'll be two dollars."

"I'll pay her for helping me, nothing more."

"You'll pay me, Rincon."

Duffy gave him two silver dollars. With his bottle and carbine he climbed a narrow flight of stairs. In a small room Duffy sank tiredly to a cot and drank from his bottle. He put the carbine on the floor by the bed.

Socorro heated water, chattering about his wound, the blood on his clothing. She washed the wound and bandaged it. She went downstairs and came back presently with a meat sandwich. She also brought soap and a razor and towel. While he ate, they conversed in Spanish. She seemed delighted to hear her own language spoken. There were not many Mexicans here, she said.

She wanted to know who had wounded him. He said it was probably Ed Loren, Kell's segundo.

"He has the pretty face of a woman," Socorro said, her lips twisting. "He is a *cabrone*."

When Duffy had shaved, Casson came upstairs and told the girl to get out. Casson closed the door, leaned his wide back against it. "You look some better."

"I feel some better."

"Loren was in here this afternoon. He got pretty drunk. He talked about that deal you got with Middleton. He said he was goin' down to Rifle Ranch and see if you was there by any chance."

"He shot me when my back was turned," Duffy said. "I'll be looking at him over a gun barrel one of these days. Face to face."

"It ain't like Loren to bushwhack a man." Casson's big scarred face seemed thoughtful. "Might be he's scared of you."

"Good. That'll make my job easier."

Casson shook his head. "You got a tough job. It won't be

easy. Like I told you downstairs, you and me could work together."

"I work for Middleton."

"You looked over the Rifle Creek place yet?" Casson asked, and when Duffy said he hadn't, "I thought so. Kell's been using the place as a line camp. Since Ralph Edmonds—died."

Duffy got up and put the razor on a shelf. "Who's Ralph Edmonds?"

"The foreman Middleton sent out last year to run the Rifle Creek place."

Duffy turned, feeling a slow anger. "Middleton didn't tell me about Edmonds. I figured I was the first he sent out here."

"Edmonds didn't stay long. He died of the black pneumonia. So they say."

Duffy clenched his teeth, and this started up the pain in his head again. Quietly he cursed Randolph Middleton II.

Casson, misinterpreting the look on his face, said, "Gettin' scared out?"

"No, but I'd sure have raised my price if I'd known Middleton already had one foreman shot out from under him."

"I didn't say Edmonds was shot."

As Duffy took a long drink from the bottle Casson smiled down from his great height. The scars on his face, some said, were from a day when he was pitched by a wild horse into cactus. Others said some five or six men—it had taken that many—had pinned him down one day, while another man worked on his face with the point of a knife. The incident concerned a woman's honor, the gossips said.

"You think over about dealin' with me in cows," Casson said. Duffy started to protest, but Casson held up a hand to silence him. "You get some sleep. Nobody'll bother you. Mike Casson takes care of his friends."

"This is the girl's room. I can't stay here."

"There's another one she can use." Casson opened the door, looked back. "You paid for her, you might as well use your ticket."

"I paid for the cleanup and the food and bandage."

"You a puritan, Rincon?" Casson said with a thin smile.

"I've sowed some oats. I've reaped a few. I'm not through yet."

"Oh, I figured maybe you didn't like back-room girls—"

"The finest woman I ever knew was— Well, she was like Soccorro," Duffy said. "It's men like Billy Rooley that I can't stomach." Duffy gave Casson a hard look. "I'd like to push him back under the manure pile where he was born."

"Billy's all right," Casson said lightly. "You'll do most anything to make a dollar before you're shut of this country." He leaned forward. "There's a lot of money to be made off that Rifle Creek place."

"The hell with you, Casson," Duffy said tiredly.

Casson came back into the room, picked up the carbine Duffy had put on the floor by the cot. He held out the weapon, pointing at a small SK cut in the stock. "I sold this rifle to Kell last year. He give it to his wife as a present. Reckon you knew she was a picture bride."

"Middleton mentioned it." Duffy was staring at the carbine thoughtfully.

"How'd you get hold of Mrs. Kell's rifle?"

Duffy met the gray eyes. "I found it."

"Was Mrs. Kell maybe with Ed?" Casson said, but Duffy just looked at him. He took the carbine back and after a moment Casson said, "You'll be on my side of the creek yet, Rincon. Wait and see." Casson went out, closing the door.

Duffy bolted the door. He stretched out on the cot and was instantly asleep. He dreamed of Mrs. Suella Kell with her pale hair and the green dress, damp from the rain, clinging to her fine figure.

He also had another dream. He dreamed that Casson was talking to a stranger, saying, "You're the third foreman Middleton has sent out to run the Rifle Creek place. The first one was Ralph Edmonds. The last one was a fella named Duffy Rincon. They said he was a tough Texas ramrod. He's buried down the road a piece."

Chapter 3

ON THIS LATE AFTERNOON Kyle Kell stood in the yard at Mountain Ranch headquarters, waiting for his wife to come home. His temper was growing. The ranch hands were careful to stay away from him. Behind him the frame buildings were spread out on a gigantic shelf of rock. In the main house there was only one source of heat, aside from the cookstove, and this was a rock fireplace. In winter the one bedroom was so icy that a side of beef would keep for months, Suella Kell claimed. She had asked her husband to install a stove in the bedroom for her comfort. Kell said it would be a waste of money. He and his wife slept on a pile of buffalo robes on the kitchen floor.

The sudden appearance of Mrs. Kell's young sister, Merry Dunn, who had come out from Joplin, caused some inconvenience. For a week Kell and his wife occupied the bedroom while the girl slept in the kitchen. But Kell soon tired of the cold nights. He and Suella went back to their buffalo robes in the kitchen and the girl had the bedroom. Since the girl's sudden arrival two weeks ago, there had been even more tension on the ranch.

Kell tramped the yard, old suspicions growing in him when his wife did not return. She had taken the buggy early that morning and gone to Packer.

"If she ain't home by dark!" Kell shouted across the yard at Pap Walcott, "she better never come back!"

Walcott stood in front of the cookshack. He did the cooking there since Kell had taken himself a wife. His hair was thin and gray, his legs bowed. "She'll be back, Kyle," the old man said.

Kell glared down the slanting road. He was tall, heavy through the body. He wore a downsweeping black mustache

that hid the corners of a rebellious mouth. A spade beard accentuated the outthrust of his jaw. He wore a patched vest and a sweat-stained shirt and worn pants. His hat looked as if he had tried to cook it for breakfast. He didn't look like the ramrod of an outfit the size of the Skull Mountain Ranch. If Kell was stealing Skull beef, as a lot of people claimed, he obviously wasn't putting any of the proceeds on his back.

Pap Walcott came across the yard, wiping his hands on a grease-stained flour-sack apron. "She ain't a horse, Kyle," the old man said quietly. "Don't treat her like one."

Kell bit back an oath. He scowled at Walcott. In his time Walcott had been a top hand, a tough man. They said he and Kyle Kell and the late owner of the Skull ranch, Howie Middleton, had been in Mexico together. But nobody spoke about that. When Howie Middleton died two years ago and left the ranches to his nephew, Randolph Middleton II, everyone expected the new heir to clean house. But young Middleton had never set foot in Arizona. Apparently he intended to stay safely in Chicago. The word spread that he was afraid to come out and fire Kell. Last year he had sent out this Ralph Edmonds. Edmonds had stayed exactly two weeks at the Rifle Creek Ranch of Skull.

Experts in the cattle business had advised Middleton that with the death of his uncle the Rifle Creek place should continue to be run separately. When Howie Middleton was alive, Kell had ramrodded the Mountain Ranch as he did now, and old Howie managed the layout at Rifle Creek. That was the way to do it, the experts said, run both ranches separately as long as there was so much range between them that did not belong to Skull.

After Kell announced in Packer one day that Ralph Edmonds, the new ramrod, had died of black pneumonia, no one gave the matter further thought. Although there were plenty of privately expressed opinions. Knowing the reputation of Kyle Kell, and there being no law nearer than Prescott, none of the local citizens had deemed it advisable to investigate Edmonds' death. Not that anyone much cared. The country had liked old Howie Middleton because he had been fully as rough as Kell, and could keep the foreman in hand.

But this rich nephew, who came from a fine Chicago family and who had never put his palm to an ax handle or held a rope or gun or done one damn honest sweatin' day's work could sit back there and collect money other men risked their lives to earn for him, was not well liked.

So nobody really cared if Kyle Kell stole him out of his inheritance. It served him right.

Now the word was out that Middleton was sending out a new ramrod named Rincon to run the Rifle Creek Ranch in place of Kell who had been managing both places since Howie Middleton's death. Save for the two-week tenure of Edmonds.

The country knew this Rincon would sooner or later learn that Kell was rustling Skull beef. That should produce a lot of gunfire, the old-timers said. To increase the possibility of trouble, Rincon had a Mexican name.

Kell had been expected to blow Duffy Rincon out of his boots the moment he arrived. Everyone knew how Kell felt about Mexicans. This hatred was due to some incident that had taken place in Mexico years ago when he and Howie Middleton and Pap Walcott were running cattle there together. But nobody ever got too curious, having a healthy respect for Kell's temper.

There had been a feeling in the country that last year, when Kell took himself a picture bride, it might gentle him a little. But it had made him worse.

"If I catch her off in the brush with somebody," Kell cried, "I'll—"

"That's a hell of a way to talk about your wife," Pap Walcott said. "You oughta watch your talk." The old man glanced toward the main house. "Things are different now since your wife's sister come here. She's just a young gal. She ain't used to that sort of talk."

Kell peered around and saw that Merry Dunn was indeed within earshot. She had come out of the house to empty a pan of water. Since coming here two weeks ago she had taken on some of the house chores. The wind whipping up over the shelf pressed a gray dress against her, stirred her long, dark hair.

Men in the yard paused in their labors to look at the girl. They didn't need to be told that it was spring. You could smell it in the air. You were made more aware of it by the sight of this shapely girl. There were a lot of forgotten dreams revived in that moment before she returned to the house.

Pap Walcott pointed down the winding road that slanted up to the shelf where the ranch buildings were located. "All that stewin' for nothin', Kyle. Here comes Suella now."

Suella felt sickened at the violence she had witnessed this day. Ed Loren had left her some miles back so that they would approach the ranch from different directions. She knew the delay caused by the balky horse and the other events of the day would make Kyle furious. She had gone to town ostensibly to pick up some yard goods. In reality she wanted to meet the stage that came twice a month by way of Packer. She had expected Duffy Rincon to be on the stage. The town loafers said Rincon had likely learned of Kell's reputation at the last minute and decided to forget his deal with Middleton. Likely he'd got wind of what happened to Ralph Edmonds last year.

On the chance he might have come by horse and gone directly to Rifle Creek Ranch, she drove that way. Middleton had sent a photograph of Rincon, so she knew she would recognize him. From his picture he didn't look like a man who would lose his nerve. But then you couldn't always be sure.

She wanted to talk with Rincon, to warn him that although her husband might not be so bad as he had been pictured he, Duffy Rincon, must be firm in his dealings with Kyle Kell. She wanted him to talk sense to her husband. It would take a strong man to keep Kell in harness. She hoped this Duffy Rincon was the man.

For it wasn't her own life that was concerned now. There was her sister Merry. At first Suella had been furious at this sister she hadn't seen in five years arriving at a time like this. Of course Aunt Nora, where Merry had been living, had recently died. But Suella had expected the girl to stay in Joplin until things could be worked out. But Merry, alone for the first time in her life, felt the need of her older sister.

Thank God the girl hadn't been along with her today. The shooting of Duffy Rincon had been a brutal thing.

Now as she topped the rise in the buggy she felt a clutch of fear as she saw her husband's bulky figure in the yard. She thought of the first time she had seen him, the day she arrived in Packer last year. "I fixed up the house a mite for you, Suella," he had told her, and crushed her mouth with his bearded face. In the photograph he had sent to the marriage bureau he had been clean-shaven. She learned later that the photograph had been taken more than a dozen years ago, when Kyle was in his middle twenties.

"I figure mebby in five years or so," Kyle Kell had said after the kiss, "that I can put in a wood floor for you."

It was her first misgiving that this security on an Arizona ranch was not what she imagined it to be when she received his letter telling her to come West and become his bride. This, of course, after he had seen her photograph in the marriage catalogue.

She drove past the corrals filled with what she had decided were "murderous cowponies." Early in her stay here she found that she could not ride them. She was afraid of them and they knew it. But Merry had the natural confidence of a good rider. She had ridden a lot when she lived in Joplin with Aunt Nora. "Riding and having fun," Suella said through her teeth, "while I worked in Chicago to support her and Aunt Nora—" She decided to quit feeling sorry for herself.

Now she was driving past the bunkhouse with its rifle slots for windows; a dark and gloomy place that smelled of sweat and underwear and chewing tobacco. She had gone in there once out of curiosity when the men were on roundup.

Suella caught a flash of a gray dress up ahead and saw Merry running toward her from the house. Merry with her dark hair, her fine young body. Her eyes now were large and dark and frightened.

Suella brought the bay horse to a halt, pretending she didn't see her husband in the yard waiting for her. She tied the reins to the buggy seat brace and climbed down.

Merry said hoarsely, "Don't leave me here alone again. Next time you go to town take me with you."

Suella felt a sharp thrust of fear and anger. "Has anybody bothered you?"

"Nothing has happened—just don't leave me alone."

All that had happened this day, the strain of past months, caught at Suella's throat. "I didn't ask you to come here," she said sharply, thinking how Merry's presence had upset her own plans. Then as she heard Merry's hurt cry she said, "I didn't mean that. I'm the only family you have." She hugged the girl to her. Over Merry's shoulder she saw her husband coming toward them.

Kell came up to glare at them, a great bear of a man, bearded, wide across the chest. A bear in more ways than one. She was his wife, and she knew.

"Where you been?" he demanded.

Suella hoped her voice was steady as she told him how the horse had balked. Rage darkened Kell's eyes.

"So the only excuse you got for lollygaggin' is a balky horse," Kell said. He drew his gun and Merry gave a tight scream of fear.

Some of the hands drifting to the cookhouse to wash up for supper paused to listen to the angry bellow of their employer. Kell shouted at them to clear out. And they did.

Kell drew back the revolver hammer. For one terror-stricken moment Suella thought that in his rage he intended to use the gun on her.

"I got a way of havin' things done around herel" Kell shouted through his blunted yellow teeth. "Whether it's man or hoss, they do things my way. If they don't, I get rid of 'em."

He shifted the gun barrel and Suella cried desperately, "Kyle, what are you going to do!"

"I got no use for a balky horse. Next time you want to warm a neighbor's bed you won't have this excuse for not gettin' home on time."

Kell fired the gun. The bay horse shuddered, pitched forward on collapsed forelegs and splintered the buggy shafts as it finally sank to the ground.

"That was the most brutal, senseless thing you've ever

done!" Suella cried. Taking Merry by an arm, she hurried the girl into the house.

Merry seemed gripped with shock. "I'm getting away from here. Somehow I'm getting out of here!"

In her bedroom, with the door barred, Merry got hold of herself. She thought of the little man she had met on the stage to Packer. A nice little man who said he could get her a good job clerking in a Tucson store any time she wanted it. He had told her where to get in touch with him. Either at Casson's Store or the hotel in Packer.

Well, she would see this Billy Rooley and accept his job. It was time she stood on her own two feet.

In the yard Ed Loren, who had just ridden in, got Kell aside. He told him about shooting Duffy Rincon.

Kell, his eyes studying his segundo, said, "You're drunk."
"Yeah. But I ain't dead. Rincon is. Want to take a look at him?"

For a moment Kell stared, then he said, "Lets you and me go spit on the bastard."

They saddled up and rode out in the early dark.

Chapter 4

IN HIS DREAMS Duffy heard the voice again, and his muscles tightened as he waited for the shock of the bullet. Then consciousness flooded in. He opened his eyes to the dark room at Casson's Store and realized he had been having a nightmare. Reliving the ambush on the road to Rifle Creek Ranch.

He heard the voice again, coming from downstairs. He reached for his boots, changed his mind, and picked up the carbine. In his sock feet he cautiously made his way down the stairs.

He could see below a faint cloud of tobacco smoke and a wedge of lamplight on a pile of meal sacks. Then his man was speaking again.

"I tell ya, Mike, the damn cow business ain't what it was." The voice sounded drunker than it had on the road today.

"What do you know about the cow business, Loren?" Mike Casson said. "What do you think, Kell?"

"He knows how to sell another man's beef," Kyle Kell said, and laughed.

Then Casson said sharply, "Kell, get away from behind that bar—"

Laughing, Kell said, "Too late for that, Casson!"

Silently Duffy moved the rest of the way down the stairs, the treads creaking underfoot. But Casson's loud protest drowned out the sound: "That shotgun ain't loaded, Kell! Put it down!"

Kell laughed again. "All right, I'll cock it and let fly, and we'll see—"

"Wait!" Casson's voice was a little unsteady.

"You're a big man, Mike," Kell said. "But you ain't worth a damn unless you use your fists. Or this shotgun."

Casson said, "What do you want?"

"For one thing, I hear you hired a Mex gal."

"This is my place," Casson said. "I hire who I want."

"You done it deliberate," Kell said. "To make me sweat."

Duffy peered into the store. He could see Casson towering behind his bar at the far end, big hands half-lifted. Facing him, also behind the bar, holding a sawed-off shotgun, was a man wearing a patched and dirty leather jacket. There was another man, younger, handsome, standing in front of the bar in the shadows where the glow of the single lamp burning on the back bar did not reach.

Kell said, "Now we got somethin' else on our minds, Mike. This new ramrod, this Duffy Rincon, the Mex bastard. You seen him?"

"No."

"Ed here put a bullet in Rincon's head. Left him for the buzzards. We went lookin', but damn if this Rincon gets a second life like a cat. He left no tracks, but we figure maybe he came here."

"I ain't seen him."

Duffy, his sock feet making only a whisper of sound on the plank floor, moved into the barroom. He got his first good look at the man who had shot him. Loren stood at the far end of the bar, grinning at Casson. His flat-crowned black hat was on the back of his head, held in place by a chin strap. He was handsome enough, Duffy supposed, to appeal to a woman like Mrs. Kell. Loren didn't look drunk now.

"Hold him steady with that Greener, Kyle," Loren said. "I'll go have a look upstairs. Might be that Duffy Rincon's got his poor busted head restin' in that Mex gal's lap."

Loren took a hitch at his belt, started for the stairway. And at that moment he saw Duffy standing just under the mounted head of the grizzly. He came to a rigid halt, his mouth opening slowly. A lean shadow of a man was Duffy Rincon, a white bandage around the head.

Kell, reacting to his segundo's surprise, turned his head slightly to look back over his shoulder. Duffy sprang forward, brought down the barrel of the carbine across the shotgun

The impact triggered both barrels into the floor. The recoil of the weapon sent Kell crashing against the bar.

Duffy spun away, lifted the carbine. By this time Loren had recovered from so suddenly seeing the man he earlier thought he had killed. His momentary surprise gone, Loren with cool precision was bringing up his gun.

Duffy fired the carbine, missed his target. Cursing, he jerked in another shell. Before he could fire, Casson, who had taken advantage of Duffy's interference to drag up a revolver from a drawer, swept the lamp off the back bar. Darkness swept down on the store. Before Kell could drop the empty shotgun and get his revolver, Casson covered him.

Duffy, crouching, fired at the dancing shadow of Ed Loren. The flash of the carbine lighted Loren as he backed for the front door. A red eye winked at Duffy. He heard a bullet thud into the mounted head of the grizzly on the wall behind him. Then Loren was gone, his horse at a hard run away from the store. There was a streak of flame from the direction of Loren's flight; a bullet screamed off a door hinge.

Duffy came up behind Kell, put the carbine muzzle against his spine. "Stand easy, Kell," Duffy warned.

He and Casson herded the bearded ramrod into a small office in the back. Casson lighted a lamp, set it on top of a squat iron safe. He gripped a revolver, the muzzle slanted at Kell. But Kell paid no attention. He was staring at Duffy, who had put a haunch on the edge of a rolltop desk.

• Suddenly Kell threw back his head and laughed. "Hell, you're no Mexican, Rincon!"

"Never said I was."

"It's a Mex name." When Duffy said nothing to this Kell leaned forward. "I figure maybe you an' me can work together."

"Middleton hired me to work with you," Duffy said. He was dead tired, and he had to fight to keep from sending a bullet into Kell and thus ending this thing now. For he knew that before it was over many good men would die. "Middleton said if I found you stealing his beef, to fire you."

"Hah!" Kell fingered his spade beard. "No man's goin'

to fire me." He looked around at Casson. "Mike, go get us a bottle."

"You'll get no bottle," Casson said. "And you'll pay for blowin' a hole in the floor with my shotgun."

Kell said, "You're twirlin' a wide loop, Mike. Be careful you don't get caught up in it. You'll need me and Rincon—"

"Me and Rincon are partners," Casson said.

Kell looked around at Duffy, who said, "I never claimed I'd go in with you, Casson."

"You might as well make up your mind," Casson said. The eyes in the scarred face were intent. "If I hadn't dragged that gun and covered Kell, Loren would've had you dead center."

"And I kept Kell from blowing you apart with your own shotgun," Duffy reminded coldly. "So we're even."

Kell was studying the bandage on Duffy's head. "At least Ed wasn't lyin' about that. He did shoot you."

"Yeah. He'd have made sure of the job if he hadn't been drunk." Or, Duffy felt like adding, if a woman hadn't begged him not to put in a bullet for luck. A woman with a promise in her voice.

Kell rubbed his bearded jaw. The fact that he and Loren had come out on the short end of a gun fight didn't seem to bother him in the least. "Tell you what," Kell said. "I'm sick of Loren. Have been for a long time. I'll send him packin'. We're both workin' for the same boss, Rincon. You come to Mountain and we'll talk things over. And don't get in a harness with Casson. He can't do nothin' for you."

Casson's scarred face seemed amused. "I can do a hell of a lot more than you, Kyle."

Kell spread his hands away from his body. "Put up the rifle, Rincon. You and me got no fight."

Duffy lowered the carbine. Kell backed to the door. "Remember what I said about Loren. He's through." Kell looked at Duffy's dark red hair that sprouted above the bandage, his blue eyes. He seemed pleased with what he saw. "I'm glad you ain't a Mex, Rincon," Kell said.

"Is that supposed to make us friends?" Duffy's voice was

hard. He moved to the door where Kell was standing. "Just why do you have a hate on for Mexicans?"

Kell seemed to debate whether to reveal a secret. Then he said, "I was married to a Mex gal. She took our boy and run away. I never did find her or the kid. I spent five years huntin'. You wonder why I hate?"

Duffy said, "So one woman treats you bad. And you decide to hate every one of her race. That makes tall sense, Kell. It sure makes sense."

Kell shrugged, ignoring the sarcasm. "You ride out with me to Mountain tonight." Duffy shook his head. Kell frowned, said, "I'll be easy to get along with." Still Duffy said nothing. Kell said, "Don't forget you were damn lucky with Loren tonight."

"I know that."

"Luck's got a way of stretchin' thin," Kell said. He looked at Casson's revolver. "You figure to shoot that gun, Mike, or hold it all night?"

"You better clear out," Casson said, "before I start thinkin' what a no-good you really are and pull the trigger."

Kell told Duffy he'd send him an invite to supper at Mountain.

Casson gave a final warning. "Don't you and Loren try sneakin' back."

"Loren's fired," Kell said. He lowered his gaze to the carbine Duffy held, regarded it briefly, then went out. In a moment the sounds of his horse could be heard moving away from the store in the darkness.

"Think he recognized this carbine?" Duffy said.

"If he did, I feel sorry for his wife," Casson said. "He'll be wonderin' how you got Suella's rifle. Was Mrs. Kell there when Loren shot you?"

Duffy said nothing.

"Reckon everybody knows Mrs. Kell and Loren are sweeter than wild honey. Everybody knows but Kyle, that is." Casson cocked his big head as the hoofbeats of Kell's horse faded. "I should've shot him when I had the chance. Coverin' me with my own shotgun." Duffy still made no comment and Casson blew out the lamp. "Just in case," he said. "That talk about

him firin' Loren don't wash with me. Even if he figures his wife and Loren are seein' each other. He needs Loren now. Later, when the shootin's over, Kell will likely blow out the back of Loren's head."

Duffy was fingering a hole in his shirt where a bullet, during the brief exchange of gunfire, had gone through the slack under his left arm. His margin of life this day had been small indeed. One bullet had nearly torn into his brain. The second had come close to ripping into a lung.

In the dark store Casson set out a bottle and they drank to the luck that was theirs this night.

Duffy said, "So his first wife took their child and ran away. Can't say I blame her after meeting Kell."

Casson said, "We got more important things to talk about. You don't owe Middleton a damn thing. He's a rich man sittin' in a plush seat back in Chicago—"

"Not a rich man," Duffy said. "If Skull doesn't show a profit this year Middleton will go broke."

"Well, help him go broke then." Casson seemed amused. "I'm not a thief. I told you that."

Casson leaned close. Moonlight filtering through a side window touched the scars on his face. "You'll steal beef, Rincon. Before you're through you'll move everything off Skull that ain't growin' in the ground and sell it. And maybe even a little of that."

"Middleton established credit for me at the bank in Packer. Will you run a bill for me? I need another rifle, a revolver. A horse."

"It'll cost Middleton plenty," Casson said.

Because he thought it wise to pull out of here tonight and lessen the chance that Kell might come back with his crew and trap him, Duffy rode out in the thick darkness.

Chapter 5

AFTER LEAVING HIS COLD CAMP, halfway to Rifle Creek Ranch, Duffy came upon his dead horse. A lion, from the looks of the sign, had feasted during the night. He transferred his saddle from the dead animal to the one he had bought from Casson at an exorbitant price.

At noon he got his first glimpse of his new domain. He surveyed Rifle Creek Ranch in disgust. He knew it was the right place because of the map Middleton had given him in Kansas. As Duffy stood disconsolately in the weed-grown yard, he thought of how Middleton had described this place. Good tight buildings, corrals filled with horses, and a crew of fifteen men who had been loyal to his late uncle, Howie Middleton.

And green grass as far as a man could see. Middleton had been right about one thing. The spring grass.

The door to the flat-roofed main house was hanging by one horseshoe hinge; the bunkhouse had been used as a stable, and the barn had been shoved from corner stones and was now tilted at a precarious angle, probably by a winter blow.

The place was deserted. He remembered Casson saying that Kell had been using this place as a line camp since the death of Ralph Edmonds. But this place was too rundown to even be an efficient camp. Duffy was disgusted.

The right side of his face below the slash at his temple was still stiff when he moved his jaw. But the throbbing headache was gone. It was the only good thing that had happened to him on this grim day.

He was half a mind to turn his back on the place and ride out. But stubbornly he refused to give up.

Because there was no food in the house, he took his new

rifle and hunted for deer sign. Within an hour he returned with a haunch of venison.

There was little furniture in the house, only two kegs for chairs, a rickety table and a rusted stove.

As he fried venison steak on a stove lid he thought of that pale, frightened little man who had hired him. "I'm desperate, Rincon," Randolph Middleton II had said in Kansas. "I need a man of your ability to help me—"

"A man of my ability," Duffy said through his teeth. He wished mightily that Middleton would walk through that door. He would love to put the back of his hand to that pale young face. "The lying little bastard," Duffy said aloud.

After supper he toured the yard, looking for a suspicious mound of earth that might indicate a grave. But he found no evidence of a burial place for this Ralph Edmonds who had served Middleton for such a short time here at Rifle Creek Ranch. The man who had died conveniently of what they termed the black pneumonia.

In the twilight he stared through the broken windows at the mountains that rose like crooked teeth in the distance. He thought of his native Texas and was gripped with nostalgia. Was it his native Texas? he corrected. Hell, he didn't know. He didn't know who had given birth to him or who had sired him. Maybe it had been Texas, maybe New Mexico, maybe Old Mexico. He had been found years ago some miles south of the town of Rincon, Texas. He had been thrown clear of the wreckage of a wagon that had plunged during a storm from a road that twisted two hundred feet above. Marauders had come first upon the wreckage and stolen what was of value and burned the rest. So there was no record of any name; no letters, no papers of any kind. But whoever the renegades were, white or red, they had not found the year-old boy who had been hurled into brush farther down the canyon.

Twenty-nine years ago he had been found by a saloonman named Duffy. They had named him Rincon after the town and they had given him Duffy as his first name. And this man Duffy and a woman who lived in a house behind the saloon, a woman named Gypsy, had raised him. This woman

Gypsy had given him his education, such as it was. After teaching him his letters she had gotten him interested in books. There was no school in Rincon, for it was only a ragged pattern of 'dobe buildings set down in the lonesome end of a hard world, as the natives put it. It was a town of rough men who lived precarious years on either side of the border. They drifted in and some were seen no more.

He got his education in the afternoons, for the woman Gypsy did not rise until noon. When four o'clock arrived she would send him scampering with his books. She would then carefully use rice powder and make the other adjustments that would make her presentable for the night.

Now he sat on an upturned keg, clasping a knee, staring out through the door. His black mood thickened. At thirty the trail of a man's life, he knew, can descend sharply unless the heels of his boots are rooted solidly on hard ground. He thought of his plans for this place. Here in the space of a few years, if all went well, he could make his stake. It was his last chance. And he thought Middleton had provided that chance.

That was what he had planned. But now—

Well, he wasn't going to let the rundown condition of this ranch tangle him up in a loose rope. He would get a crew and supplies. And the place to get them was in the town of Packer.

The town had enjoyed a brief flurry as a mining center, but shortly after the war the gold vein petered out. Most of the town was closed up. Whatever prosperity Packer now enjoyed came from the cattle ranches that surrounded it.

Duffy rode the twelve miles to Packer, tied his horse in front of the Packer Mercantile Bank, and looked down the practically deserted street. Only the Rimrock Saloon, Arizona Hotel, and the livery stable were open for business. The other two dozen or so buildings were boarded up. An air of decay hung over the place.

In the Mercantile, Duffy asked for Hugh Ellenbert and a fat, perspiring clerk hurried to get the man. Ellenbert came along an aisle between tins of coal oil, coils of rope, and cases of tinned goods. He wore a shiny black suit and a

sweat-stained white shirt. When Duffy introduced himself, Ellenbert lost his frosty manner and invited him into a small cluttered office.

"Middleton wrote me you were coming," Ellenbert said, and offered to pour whisky, but Duffy declined. He passed over a letter of introduction Middleton had given him.

Ellenbert seemed impressed. He adjusted his steel-rimmed spectacles and stared at the gash above Duffy's right ear. But he made no comment. They talked about the beef business for a moment, then the banker-merchant confided, "I hope you can get rid of Kyle Kell some way." Ellenbert passed over a cheap cigar. "He's definitely a hindrance to the growth of this country."

Duffy was noncommittal.

"I knew Middleton's uncle well," Ellenbert went on. "Old Howie let Kell run Mountain and he ran Rifle Creek himself. It seemed to work better that way. Of course you know there are many sections of open country separating the two ranches."

Duffy lit the cigar Ellenbert had given him. "I understand Howie Middleton ran the Skull outfit with an iron hand." His first estimation of the cigar was correct. It was a cheap one. The cheapest.

"I'm sorry to say that Howie's nephew isn't quite the man his uncle was."

"So it would seem."

Ellenbert gave Duffy a shrewd look. "I wouldn't mind getting in the beef business myself. If the right partner came along."

"So?"

"If Skull is handled right it can make a lot of money." Ellenbert placed both hands on the knees of his shiny pants. "That acreage between the two Skull ranches. I control it."

Duffy stared at him through the blue haze of cheap tobacco smoke. "That puts you in a pretty strong position," he said easily. "A man might pay a lot of money to get hold of that land."

"Howie tried to buy it. But he was sick and I knew he

wouldn't last long. And I didn't want to deal with Kyle Kell. But I'd lease—to a good partner."

"You never know what might happen," Duffy said, purposely being evasive. He asked about Ralph Edmonds who had come out last year and been fatally stricken.

Ellenbert sucked on a thin lower lip. "Kell reported it as a fatal illness, yes. There's no doctor here. No representative of the law. Nobody ever saw the body."

"My guess is that he was murdered."

"And I think I know who killed him. Ed Loren."

Duffy said, getting to his feet, "I just wanted to make sure my credit was established. I'll need supplies, a team and wagon. Can you fix me up? The Rifle Creek place is a wreck."

Ellenbert got up. "I've heard it's a shambles. I think Kell doubted that Middleton would have nerve enough to send out another ramrod." Ellenbert's lips twitched in a faint smile. "After what happened to Edmonds."

"The thing I can't understand," Duffy said, "is why Middleton seems so ungodly afraid of Kell. He owns the ranch. Why can't he fire his foreman? It's done all the time."

Ellenbert's brows shot up above the steel-rimmed spectacles. "I thought you knew."

"Knew what?" Duffy demanded suspiciously, having a feeling that disaster was about to wreck his chances here.

"Why, Howie Middleton trusted Kell. You see they were old friends. And Howie could keep him in hand. But when Howie died, Kell took the bit in his teeth. He's practically told young Middleton to go to hell, I understand."

"You haven't answered my question. Why does Middleton stand for this? Kell is only a foreman, drawing ramrod's pay. He doesn't own the place, even though you'd think he did from the way he carries on."

"Kyle Kell is to have the job of running Mountain as long as he lives," Ellenbert said. "It was in old Howie's will. Didn't Middleton tell you?"

Duffy threw the cigar into a spittoon beside the desk. "A lot of things Middleton didn't tell me!"

"Well, don't hold it against young Middleton." Ellenbert

allowed his thin mouth to smile. "I suppose he thought you might not take the job if you knew the only way to get rid of Kell was—"

"To kill him?"

"I suppose we might as well speak frankly."

"I never yet hired on to kill a man."

"In this case it won't be hard. Kyle Kell is no man to like."

Duffy wrote out a list of supplies. Ellenbert said he'd fix him up with wagon and team and charge it to Skull. Duffy asked where he could get a crew together. Ellenbert seemed doubtful that he could find men in Packer, but suggested he try the Rimrock Saloon.

As Duffy started for the door, Ellenbert could no longer refrain from asking about the gash above Duffy's ear. Duffy told him how it had happened. He had removed the bandage that morning, believing in fresh air to heal a surface wound of that kind. Ellenbert seemed surprised that Loren would shoot him from the back.

"That doesn't sound like Loren," Ellenbert said. "He must have been drunk, as you say. And perhaps a little afraid of you. Remember this, Rincon. Loren is a very tough man with a gun. But Kell is tougher. I've seen them both in action here in Packer."

Duffy went out into the store, Ellenbert trailing along. "By the way," the man said, "your friend Joe Rand got in on the stage yesterday. He asked about you. Said he'd stop by Casson's Store on his way to Rifle Creek—" Seeing the blank look on Duffy's face, Ellenbert said, "This Joe Rand said you were old friends. You know a man by that name, don't you?"

"Sure—sure I know him. You have my stuff ready. I'll be back directly."

All the way to the Rimrock Saloon Duffy pondered this Joe Rand. So far as he knew he had never met anyone by that name.

In the low-ceilinged saloon Duffy introduced himself to the handful of men and asked, if anyone wanted to work for him. The men exchanged glances.

In the silence the bartender said, "You should've brought

your own crew." He was a thickly-built man with a pitted face.

Duffy let his gaze swing around the small room cluttered with deal tables, a piano in the corner, a perch for a shotgun guard. "I didn't figure on seeing so many yellow backs in this town," he said, the disappointments and frustrations making his temper give way.

Somebody swore. A couple of the men started to get up from a deal table where they were playing two-handed stud. But something in the cold eye of the tall Texan at the bar caused them to sit down again.

"Don't call us yellow," the bartender said. "Jobs ain't easy to find, neither. But a job won't do a man much good if his widow collects his pay the same day they bury him."

"Guess I'm used to dealing with Texans," Duffy said. "A Texan isn't afraid to hire on for a little trouble."

"A little trouble?" The barkeep looked disgusted. "The only men who'll hire on with you will be the kind that hang around Casson's Store. Them kind die mighty young."

"Thanks for the advice," Duffy said, and turned on his heel and stepped out into the blazing sunlight. What else could go wrong? he asked himself glumly.

Thoughtfully he moved down the plank walk toward the Mercantile Bank where he had left his horse. As he came to a slot between the two-story Arizona Hotel and a boarded-up building he saw a man and a woman engaged in earnest conversation. He slowed. He couldn't see the man's face, but a bowler hat and pink shirt suggested Billy Rooley. The dainty little man was talking to a tall, dark-haired girl in a boy's shirt and leather riding skirt.

Duffy came to a halt, his eyes studying the girl's young and attractive face. Noting his scrutiny, she said something to Rooley. The little man wheeled, the eyes in his small face chilling when he saw who it was.

"Mornin', Rincon," he said coldly.

Duffy had to hold himself in to keep from closing the distance to Rooley and smashing the man against the hotel wall as he would a fly.

He started on, noticing the instant dislike that crowded the girl's dark eyes at mention of his name.

I'm well liked around here, Duffy thought, as he went on down the street. Everybody hates my Texas guts. Even a girl I don't know.

It had taken will power not to interfere. But the girl looked old enough to know what she wanted to make of her life. But he was seething, nevertheless, as he crossed to the Mercantile. Men like Billy Rooley occupied a dark passage in his mind.

At the store he signed a bill for team and wagon and supplies. Tying his saddler to the tail gate, he drove out, the wagon filled with those necessities of life that Middleton had assured him would be found at the Rifle Creek place. Along with fifteen men who had been loyal to Middleton's late Uncle Howie.

He felt like quitting Middleton. But how could he quit? He needed this chance, needed it desperately. He had seen the old men around the ranches, doing the yard chores when they became too stove up to ride. Hanging on because of the charity of a ranch owner. Sometimes turned loose, then it was swamping in some saloon, if they were lucky.

No, Duffy wouldn't quit. Middleton would pay him that four thousand dollars a year and twenty per cent of the beef he could ship. And he would ship beef. In spite of Ed Loren or Kyle Kell. In spite of Middleton himself, the bungling, scared fool.

To take his mind off his own problems he fell to thinking about Billy Rooley. The team plodded up a steep grade, the wheels dripping dust. It was such a man as Rooley years ago who had gotten hold of a scared kid who called herself Gypsy. Gypsy had told him all about it years later when she no longer covered the gray in her hair and when there was no longer any pretense between them.

He wondered if the dark-haired girl back there in Packer really knew the kind of life she wanted to lead. A rope was much too good for a man like Rooley. Much too good.

At Casson's Store Duffy told the big man of his bad luck

in town. "They said the only place to get men in this country was here."

The big man laughed, and poured a drink for them. "I told you we'd see eye to eye before it was over."

Duffy drank the whisky, said, "I'll pay you ten dollars cash a head for every man you round up for me. But that's all. Understand?"

Casson shook his big scarred head. "Ain't enough, Rincon. I want you on my side of the creek. All the way." He leaned across his bar, jerked a thumb at a man at the far end of the store, tipped back in a chair against the wall, sound asleep. "Fella named Joe Rand has been askin' about you. I told him you'd likely be by." Casson grinned. "I knew you'd have to come to me for a crew."

Duffy walked over. The man wore a narrow-brimmed hat, tipped over his eyes. His leather jacket looked expensive, and new, as did the rest of his outfit.

Duffy tipped back the hat, peered into a pale, soft face. The face of Randolph Middleton II, from Chicago.

Middleton jerked up his head, his eyes wide. "Rincon!" he cried, and his voice ended in a frightened squeak when he saw the gash on Duffy's head. "What—what happened to your head?"

"I was thinking of bed," Duffy said in low-voiced fury, "when I should've been thinking of bullets. What in hell are you doing here?"

Fifteen minutes later they drove out together in the wagon, their saddlers tied behind. Duffy felt that this was almost more than he could bear. Being saddled with Middleton would complicate a position that already was growing more hopeless by the hour.

Chapter 6

IT WAS DAYLIGHT by the time Kyle Kell reached Mountain after the abortive incident at Casson's Store where he and Ed Loren had fared none too well with the store owner and one Duffy Rincon. He found Loren sitting with his back to a stump at the edge of the ranch yard. His horse, reins trailed, was nearby.

Kell swung down, no emotion on his bearded face. "You run out on me, Ed."

"Hell, I didn't like facin' up to Mike Casson in the dark. Remember what he done to them three hard-rock miners that jumped him last year. He barehanded 'em so bad one is dead and the other two ain't walked since."

Kell rolled a cigarette, and Loren got up and dusted the seat of his pants. "That Rincon is goin' to be a tough Texan to handle," Kell said. "You should've made sure of him. With him dead we'd have a clear shot at cleanin' up here."

"I put a bullet in his head, damn it! How'd I know he'd come to? Lucky you thought he might've made it to Casson's Store—"

"It might not have been so lucky," Kell said, and lit his cigarette. Dawn was strong now over the Ramparts to the east. "We damn near got our heads blowed off." He threw away the match, said casually, "Who talked you out of puttin' another bullet in Rincon's head? My wife?"

"Yeah, she—" Loren broke off, his eyes looking trapped.

Kell caught him by the right arm, jerked him around. "So my wife was there. I figured that!"

"Don't manhandle me!" Loren snarled, and tried to pry the steel-spring fingers from his arm. Kell's gun came up, the muzzle against Loren's throat.

"You heard what happened to that bay horse!" Kell cried.

"Men and hosses and women do things my way, or they don't stay around. Now answer up! What was my wife doin' there when Rincon was shot up?"

Loren stood very still, looking down at the shaft of steel angled at a spot just below his chin. He told how Suella Kell had been on her way to Rifle Creek Ranch to have a talk with Rincon when her horse balked. "They was there talkin' beside the road when I come up. I seen a chance to pot Rincon. I did."

"Suella didn't tell me about havin' a talk with Rincon."

"Maybe you didn't give her a chance."

Kell eased down the hammer of the gun and holstered it. Loren, his face slick with sweat, stepped back.

"You go up to the line shack," Kell said. "Stay outa sight for a spell till I get this Rincon fixed. And while I'm at it I'll also fix Casson. He's been puttin' the knife in me an inch at a time. Hirin' a Mex gal just to get me riled, damn him!"

Loren wiped his perspiring forehead on a shirt sleeve. "I had Rincon right in my sights," he complained. "Seein' him alive in Casson's after I figured him dead really give me the jumps."

"How come Rincon got hold of Suella's carbine?"

"She must've dropped it out of the buggy."

"You keep outa sight," Kell said. "I'll let on that I fired you."

Loren didn't like the idea much, but he went to the bunk-house to get his gear.

In the main house Kell ate breakfast with Suella and Merry. Merry did not look up from her plate. When the meal was over, she hurried into her bedroom and bolted the door.

Kell slanted a look at his wife, who stood at the stove, apron over her cheap green dress. He told her bluntly that Rincon wasn't dead. He noted the look of relief that flashed across her eyes. But she pretended she didn't know what he meant.

"Don't try to make out like you don't know what I'm talkin' about. Loren told me all about it."

Suella's face lost color.

"What was you talkin' to Rincon about?"

"I—I wanted to see him before you did. To try and make him see reason. Instead of using guns—" She turned back to the stove, her shoulders stiff.

"I forgot to ask Ed what you an' him done after Rincon was shot." When Suella did not look around, Kell said, "Loren damn near got his lamp put out tonight at Casson's." He told her about the shooting. "Funny thing, Rincon had your carbine. Did you give it to him?"

"It must have fallen out of the buggy."

"That's what Ed said."

She turned, clenching her fists, her handsome face pale. "Are you accusing me of having an affair with Ed Loren?"

Kell sipped his coffee, eying her. He glanced at the closed bedroom door. "Too bad she can't sleep out here with us."

"Don't say it, Kyle," Suella warned.

His brief grin was gone. His shaggy hair was loose about his face. "You jealous or something?"

"And quit looking at Merry the way you do. It doesn't look right, especially in front of the men."

"If I was married to her, I'd trust her."

"And you don't trust me!" Suella made a cutting motion with her hand. "If only I'd known then what I know now."

"You wouldn't have come here to marry me," Kell finished for her.

With a sigh Suella sank into a hide-bottomed chair across the table from her husband. "Please stay away from Merry. That's all I ask of you, Kyle."

"I mean the gal no harm." Kell's eyes were mocking.

"Would you let me have some money, Kyle? To send Merry away?" He didn't look up, and she said, "Just money enough for a stage ticket, then."

"Merry likes it here," Kell said. "She's goin' to stay. I even been thinkin' about puttin' in a stove in the bedroom!"

"Something you'd never do for me!" Suella cried.

"She's young and soft and pure."

"And I'm not, of course," she said bitterly, and knew the most foolish thing a woman can do is to allow a new hus-

band to trick her into telling about her past. Well, it was too late now for regrets.

Kell's face was ugly as he reminded her how he had seen her picture in the catalogue sent out by Martin's Gallery of Young Ladies of Marriageable Age. "I sent fifty dollars for your address. Fifty!"

"You pay more than that for a good horse!"

"You was willin' enough to come to me."

"Yes, I've thought about it many times." There was a look of despair as she turned to study the flames dancing behind the cracks in the stove.

"I tell you why you come to me!" He banged a fist on the table, his hazel eyes tight. "Nobody else wanted you!"

"Kyle, that's a rotten thing to say!"

"You figured that poor old simple Kyle Kell way out here in Arizona wouldn't have brains enough to know that the woman he picked to marry had already been bedded down."

"All right, so you're a smart worldly man." Then she tried to plead with him. "Isn't every human entitled to one mistake?"

His eyes flashed wickedly. "One, you say. One man. Maybe there was a dozen. Twenty. A hundred."

She sank back in her chair, her face dead white. "Call me the name, why don't you? Say it right out!"

And he did. He went down to the cookshack where the men were eating. He saw the quick fear in their faces and enjoyed it. These were times when a man rode sometimes a hundred miles for a riding job, then learned there had been twenty men there ahead of him.

He singled out a lank, long-faced man named Charlie Penn. "You like it here, Charlie?" Kell asked in a deceptively mild voice.

Penn licked his lips and glanced at the others crowded into the small room that smelled of frioles and fried beef. There was rage in Kell's eyes. And the men knew from past experience that Kell took this rage out on any man he happened to single out. And it looked today as if Charlie Penn were going to be elected as the board against which Kell would throw his knives. Penn got to his feet.

Kell went up to Penn, put an arm across his thin shoulder. "You're a good man, Charlie," Kell said, and Penn almost fainted in relief at not being struck in the face. "I treat my men fair, right, Pap?" He leveled this at Walcott who stood, flour-sack apron around his thin middle. "You're an old man, Pap, an' you're no good in the saddle. But I keep you on."

Walcott straightened bony shoulders. "You're preachin' today, Kyle," the old man said. "Get the sermon over. These boys got work to do."

Kell said, "We got to stick together, boys. We got troubles. The boss in Chicago has sent out a fella that wants to take over. Name of Duffy Rincon. Sounds like a Mex to me. But he don't look like one. You can't trust 'em." He eyed Walcott again. "Ain't that right, Pap?"

"You want me to say nobody can trust a Mex?"

"Say it right out, Pap. Nobody can trust a goddam Mex."

"Go to hell," Walcott said, and turned his back and started ladling out frijoles and steak, a chore that had been interrupted when Kell made his sudden entrance.

Only rarely did Kell ever show any resentment at the old man's lack of respect. Kell smiled indulgently. "I want you boys to keep your eyes open," Kell said. "If we got to do some shootin', your pay goes up five dollars a month."

Carl Miller, the roustabout, had been trying to shave the fuzz off his sixteen-year-old face that morning. He had nicked his cheeks in several places. Now he showed excitement. "Does that fightin' pay include me, Mr. Kell?"

Kell nodded sourly. "I fired Loren!" He saw the shock on the kid's face, then tramped outside.

The kid followed him, wrought up. He was Ed Loren's shadow. "Ed ain't here no more?" the kid asked, stricken.

Kell had never liked the kid because he wanted to tell him to keep on going the first day he had drifted up here. But Loren, because he saw a chance to have somebody do his dirty work for him, insisted the kid be kept on.

And seeing the kid now so concerned for Loren's welfare intensified the rage boiling in him. Loren had made a botch of this Rincon business, the damn fool. He wondered, now that he happened to think about it, just how far he could

trust his segundo. About as far as you could blow smoke against a high wind. He had hired Loren in Packer a couple of years back. Loren had just blown the heart out of a tin-horn gambler named Oldbart who clumsily had gotten an extra ace hung up in a special sleeve harness. Oldbart had been a fast man with a gun, but he was blasted out of his chair by Loren. And this proved to Kell that Loren was a good man to have in camp.

Kell jerked his head at the bunkhouse where Loren was just coming out the door with his war bag. "If you don't think I fired him, go ask him."

Kell turned and went over and got his horse, passing Loren, giving Loren a tight knowing smile. To indicate that everything was all right between them. But when he was out of sight, Kell's face hardened and he knew that one day he'd be asking his segundo questions of a personal nature. Once this Duffy Rincon was out of the way, of course.

Kell didn't return until late that night. When he went into the kitchen he found the buffalo robes still piled in the corner. He went to the bedroom and opened the door. Two heads with pallid faces lifted fearfully from the big bed.

"You sleepin' in here, Suella?" Kell asked quietly. When Suella nodded, he started to take off his boots and climb in with them.

Merry looked shocked. Suella hopped out of bed, her nightdress billowing about slender legs, her pale hair in braids. "You win, Kyle," she said dispiritedly, and went to the door and waited for him to go out.

Kell, lamp in one hand, boots in the other, grinned at Merry's frightened face. "I was only funnin'. A man just don't like to sleep alone."

When Suella had the buffalo robes rolled out she said, as if thoroughly whipped, "Why can't we at least have a bed? I feel just like a squaw."

"Merry don't act friendly. Why?"

"She heard what you called me. You should learn to keep your voice down."

"Don't you ever sleep away from me again. When I want my wife, I want her."

"I was under the impression you hated me."

"You was unfaithful. You deserve all the hate you get. Come here—"

She was in bed now. She sat up, her eyes narrowed. "When was I unfaithful?" she demanded, and held her breath.

"Before you was married to me—"

"Oh," she said, relief in her voice. "How could I be unfaithful? I didn't even know you."

His large hands caught her shoulders and crushed her back against the buffalo robes. "What was his name?"

She closed her eyes against the pain of his pressing fingers. "Tom. Tom Ardmore. But I've told you—"

"If I ever see this Tom Ardmore, I'll kill him."

"He's one man you won't kill. He's already dead. Drowned when his wagon overturned in the river."

"How many others besides this Tom?"

She cried out at the pain of the fingers digging into her shoulders. The bedroom door banged open. Merry, in her long nightdress, stood there, holding a pistol in both hands.

"Keep away from my sister, you filthy beast!"

Kell leaped to his feet, standing in the center of the buffalo robes, clad only in his underwear. For a long moment he stared at the big Navy Colt the girl gripped in trembling hands. "Tell her we're just married folks," Kell said to Suella. "When she gets married, she'll see how it is—"

"Merry, go back to bed!" Suella cried. "Please!"

Merry said, "If you ever touch her again, I'll kill you!"

Kell's laughter was hollow. "You go along now, like Suella says. Cryin' out like that is just part of the game married folks play."

Suella managed a smile. "I'll explain in the morning."

"Put that gun down now," Kell said, when Merry did not move. "You might hurt your pretty self."

After a moment Merry lowered the pistol and went into her bedroom and closed the door. "Who give her that gun?" Kell demanded.

Suella looked away. "It wasn't pretty for a sensitive girl like Merry to see us like this."

"She's got to learn sometime." Then his face changed. By God, he did have a good looker for a wife. He sure did. The best-lookin' woman north of Prescott. "I'll make it up to you, Suella," he said hoarsely. "You'll see. Now come on now and quit holdin' back."

When Kell fell asleep, Suella went to Merry's room and held the girl to her. "I'm going to take care of you. Don't worry."

"I don't need taking care of," Merry said. She was sitting on the edge of her bed, unable to sleep. "I'm old enough to look out for myself."

"I promised Poppa that I'd always look out for you."

"I want to look out for myself." Merry turned to her older sister. "I ruined things for you by coming here before you sent for me."

"Kyle is a hard man to understand." Suella bit her lip. "I'm glad this Duffy Rincon isn't dead. I—"

"This is a terrible place to live." The girl shuddered.

"This is brutal country, Merry. I didn't realize it myself until I got here."

She froze when she heard a tapping on the window, and then Ed Loren's voice. She gave Merry a guilty look and hurried out of the bedroom. She put a cloak over her night-dress and softly opened the rear door and stepped out into the darkness.

Loren, standing in a patch of moonlight, tried to take her in his arms. She pulled away. "You fool," she hissed. "Get out of here. Kyle's asleep. But he may wake up."

Loren showed his white teeth. He smelled of whisky. Lights glowed in the bunkhouse windows across the yard.

"We can leave next week, Suella," he said.

"I've told you," Suella said tensely. "Everything's changed since Merry came. Don't you understand?"

"Wasn't changed after we left Rincon."

"That—that was different." She reached for the door behind her. "Get away, Ed. Do you want us both to get killed?"

Loren was slender, not a tall man but well-proportioned. His hair, the color of wild mustard, smelled of pomade.

"I got an idea where Kyle keeps the money hid," he said. "Soon as I find out for sure you an' me are gettin' out of here."

Suella leaned weakly back against the door. "My sister coming has changed everything."

He reached for her, and she sidestepped him, got the door open, and went into the house.

Cursing softly, Loren went down to the corral. He had his bedroll tied onto his saddle. He had hung around in the hopes of having this talk with Suella. He had meant to tell her to come up to the line shack. Well, he'd get word to her somehow.

He was halfway across the yard when he saw Carl Miller coming toward him. He wondered if this damn-fool kid had seen him talking to Mrs. Kell. Well, no matter. The kid, tall for sixteen, had pale hair like Loren's. He wore a gun tied down like Loren, ivory butted with roses carved in the plates. He swaggered like Loren, spat like Loren, and used the same pomade on his hair.

"You got any jobs you want me to do, Ed?" the kid said hopefully. "I sure don't like it none Kell fired you."

"I'll let you in on a secret. He never fired me. But keep it quiet."

"Sure, Ed. You want anything in town? I'll ride down and get it."

"Anything I want, I'll let you know." And Loren knew this to be literally true. The kid would shine his boots, curry his horse, take his clothes clear to the laundry in Packer where a Mexican woman, whom Kyle would not allow on the place, did a man's shirts up fancy as Saturday night.

"I'll be up at the line shack," Loren said. "Anything I want, you send up." He glanced at the main house, thinking of Suella. "I trust you, kid. I trust you with anything. Man or woman."

In the house, in the dark, Suella was thinking of Ed Loren, hating him. Her thoughts turned to Duffy Rincon.

Her only hope lay with this man whom she had talked to only briefly. And then those cowardly shots had come out of the thicket and struck down Rincon and his horse.

She could never again have any feeling for Loren after that foul act. Never again.

Chapter 7

RANDOLPH MIDDLETON II was astounded when he saw the Rifle Creek place. The utter abandonment of the buildings, the corrals, the yard brought home all too clearly the type of game Kell had been playing since Howie Middleton died.

"He's out to ruin me," Middleton said in a stricken voice.

Duffy tried desperately to keep a check rein on his temper. This man who had picked the name Joe Rand out of the air sat despondently on one of the kegs in the empty house while Duffy cooked a meal for them. Middleton's hair was brown, curling out from under the narrow brim of his hat. His shirt was a good gray wool, topped at the collar by a gambler's string tie. His pants were black as were the boots. The whole outfit shrieked of newness.

"Why'd you come?" Duffy demanded when they were eating.

"I—I wanted to see the place for myself. I felt safe with you here."

"You should've stayed in Chicago." He scowled across the table at this slightly-built man, wondering how a tough old rancher like this Howie Middleton had seemed to be could have had such a bumbling coward for a nephew.

"This is a rough game," Duffy went on. "A lot rougher than you led me to believe back in Kansas."

"I thought by this time—"

"You thought by this time I'd have your problems put in a sack and the sack laced tight." He leveled a forefinger at Middleton. "Why didn't you tell me about Ralph Edmonds?"

Middleton's brown eyes looked worried. "I didn't think it was necessary—"

"You lied to me all the way."

"I just withheld information. It wasn't lying. I was afraid you might not take the job if you knew I'd already suffered one failure."

"Tell me something, do you have the money to pay me four thousand dollars a year as my contract calls for? Or is the state of your bank account some more information you've withheld?"

"I can't pay unless we ship cattle," Middleton said glumly, and stared down at the scarred top of the table.

"Then, little man," Duffy said coldly, "we'll ship beef." He got up, paced the uneven dirt floor. "What was the last tally on Rifle Creek?"

Middleton was thoughtful for a moment. Then he said that shortly before he died Uncle Howie had counted close to two thousand head of beef on the Rifle Creek Ranch alone.

Duffy turned, his blue eyes hard. "I've been over a piece of this range. From what I've seen if we find five hundred head we'll be lucky. Unless there's some lush grass someplace where fifteen hundred head are crowded. Which I doubt."

Middleton looked up. "You think Kell has stripped Rifle Creek?"

Duffy placed both hands on the table top, leaned close. "I'd say he's likely sold fifteen hundred head of beef. At least. On top of that he's been charging you each month for a crew that doesn't exist. He's been using this place as a line camp, so they say. But he's been making you pay as if this was run as a full-scale ranch. My God, Middleton, how could you have been so weak in the spine as to let him get away with this?"

"I—I didn't know."

"You should have come out to see for yourself."

"Well, I'm here," Middleton said. "And I am seeing for myself. Seeing what's left," he finished despondently. "I wish Uncle Howie could have taken me when I was a boy. He and my father didn't get along. My father was weak. Like I am weak. There's a girl in Chicago I plan to marry. She—well, her family thinks social position is important. If I can't make these ranches pay so I can live in a style—"

"Social position," Duffy said curtly, "is something you won't worry about if you're in a pine box."

"You—you think there's danger?"

Duffy gave a short laugh. "This isn't Chicago. This isn't even rail's end at Anchor, Kansas. You said at our meeting there that you didn't like Anchor. Anchor is civilized compared to this country. Here a man's life isn't worth the price of a second-hand pair of boots."

"I shouldn't have come."

"Does anybody around here know you by sight?"

"No."

"Good. Just so Kell doesn't get wind of the fact that you're Randolph Middleton the Second. I've got a feeling your life wouldn't be worth much if he found out."

"You think I'm a coward. That I should have the guts to fire Kell myself."

Duffy said softly, "We both know he *can't* be fired. You hired me to kill a man, didn't you?"

Middleton looked away and squirmed on the keg. "It seems to be the way things are settled in this country." His brown eyes searched Duffy's face. "You've killed before, Rincon. It shouldn't make any difference."

"After you kill a man, you have to sleep with it."

"You were in the war. You fought for the South."

"The killing sickens a man. I had hoped I was through with it." He knew what Middleton was going through. The man, probably twenty-five, had hired a Texas ramrod, thinking all his problems would be solved. He had taken the stage from Anchor, arriving in Packer. There he bought a horse and started to look for Duffy Rincon. And when he arrived at one of his ranches, he found chaos. Not the bustling, prosperous ranch his late uncle had written about so many times. "You've got to realize that Kell let this place become a wreck on purpose. He's out to ruin you." Duffy put his back to the stove. "In a year you won't have a 'dobe dollar in your pocket if you don't fight. Your back's to the wall. You can fight this thing through or you can go back to Chicago and forget it."

"I—I never thought I'd become so personally involved. That I might have to shoot a man. Or be shot at."

The prospect of having to fight to hold his possessions had never occurred to him before. He thought he could come out here, look around, see that Duffy Rincon had disposed of Kyle Kell, then make his identity known to the country.

For two days Duffy and Middleton made a circuit of the Rifle Creek place, making a spot check. Middleton was stiff from long hours in the saddle. But Duffy had to give him credit for one thing, he didn't complain.

As near as Duffy could tell his estimate of five hundred head left on the ranch was much too high. If there were three hundred, it would be generous. Middleton seemed bewildered when Duffy made these facts known.

"The dirty thief," Middleton said.

"One thing about thieving," Duffy said. "Kell is getting a little on his end of the stick."

"Somebody is stealing from Kell?"

"Somebody is stealing Kell's wife."

Back at the house Duffy said, "We need a crew." He hated to deal with Mike Casson because of the man's connection with Billy Rooley. But there seemed to be no choice. You couldn't blame the men around Packer for not wanting to go on the Rifle Creek pay roll. It was inevitable that a clash with Kell would produce new graves. No man in his right mind wanted to sign on for a lost cause. And everyone figured that Rifle Creek was as good as dead.

Duffy told Middleton about Casson.

"A rough place," Middleton said. "I know, I spent some hours there waiting for you. Men talk about stealing beef or shooting another man, and laugh about it."

"Don't forget there are some good people in this country. Don't judge everyone by the scum that hangs around Casson's Store."

"Speaking of scum," Middleton said, his lips twisting. "A Mexican girl solicited me while I was waiting at the store. I felt like kicking her in the face."

"Don't put yourself any lower in my estimation than you already are," Duffy said coldly. The man had lied to him, withheld information. Hired him as a common killer. And now he was belittling those who had no chance.

Middleton seemed stunned by his attitude. "I don't understand you, Rincon. You have a reputation for toughness. That's why I looked you up and hired you. Yet you take such a saintly view of a girl like that."

Duffy felt like telling Middleton to go to hell. Riding out. But how could he? Where would he go? Back to Texas? And to what? Besides, he would leave this floundering young man to certain death. He'd never live to get out of this country.

"I'm sorry," Middleton said anxiously. "Things are different out here. I'll get used to them, I guess."

Duffy said he was going to Casson's Store to see about a crew. "I don't think you better risk going with me. Casson's smart. He may figure out who you are. Maybe he has already. Let's not stretch our luck. I don't want your blood on my hands, so do what I tell you."

Middleton looked angry for a moment, then he said, "I wouldn't blame you much if you wanted to back out of our agreement. I haven't been much of a man about this thing so far."

"We've got a contract, Mr. Middleton. Drawn up by a lawyer in Kansas."

"Yes, so we have." Middleton looked at the weed-grown yard. "Call me Rand. I hate Randolph and I despise Randy."

"All right, Rand. But if anybody comes around, it's Joe Rand." Duffy saddled his horse, swung into the saddle. "If I'd known there were no men here I'd have brought my own crew from Texas. Now I'm alone."

"Not quite," Middleton said, his head held high. "I'm with you."

Duffy gave him a tight smile, and Middleton looked down at his clenched hands. "I know," he said slowly, "you consider me less than a man. I'm of no use in a situation like this."

"I didn't say that," Duffy told him.

"It's the way Uncle Howie felt about me."

Two miles from the Rifle Creek headquarters Duffy came suddenly upon Mrs. Kyle Kell, driving her buggy toward the ranch. When she saw him, she halted the buggy and waited for him to come up.

Duffy touched the brim of his hat. They sat for several moments regarding each other. She was really a handsome woman, he decided, and it hadn't only been the weariness after a long trail that had made him sit his saddle the other day and study her. And find a warmth and relaxation in the studying.

He showed an exaggerated caution, turning in the saddle, looking carefully on all sides.

She flushed. "You don't have to worry. There's nobody lurking in the brush today."

"Loren might be around. He was the other day."

"You don't have to worry. He and my husband had an argument. Loren's been fired." She fussed with a lock of her pale hair that had come loose to blow against a fair cheek. "I was on my way to see you at Rifle Creek. I—I wanted to tell you I'm glad you're alive. Very glad."

He thought it was a long way to drive for a woman to express thanks for this sort of thing. After all, he was nothing to her. But he did not voice his wonder.

"I guess I've got you to thank for talking him out of putting that extra bullet in me," Duffy said. "One for luck, was the way he said it."

She looked at him worriedly. "Then you were conscious?"

"Partially, at least."

"And you heard. I mean everything that was said."

"Don't worry, Mrs. Kell. I won't say anything to your husband about what I overheard. I owe you too much for that. What you and Loren do, or have done, is your own business."

"It was a cowardly thing for him to do, shoot when your back was turned. I despise him!"

"And I've got you to thank for leaving your carbine. I'll

return it to you one of these days." He nodded at the sorrel horse in the buggy shafts. "What happened to the balky bay? Put out to pasture?"

She told him how her husband had shot the horse.

"Because a horse balks, he shoots it?" Duffy said.

She shook her pale head. "Because he thought I used that as an excuse for not getting home in time." She wrapped the reins suddenly around a seat brace and held out her hands to him. "Will you help me down, Mr. Rincon?"

He hesitated a moment, looking around again at the flats carpeted with the sweep of green plush, the thicket beside the road, the Ramparts beyond, rising rock-walled and formidable and lonely. He swung down and caught her by the elbows when she stepped forward off the wheel hub.

Breathless, she clung to him, the length of her, in the same cheap dress, pressed against him. Her head was turned and he could feel the perfumed softness of her hair. And the spark crashed upward like the thrust of a knife and for a moment, when he forcibly turned her head and peered into her eyes, he thought of taking what he read there. Then he pushed her away.

"I was tempted once, Mrs. Kell," he said. "It almost cost me my head. Not again. What is it you want to see me about? Not to express thanks that I'm alive instead of dead with a bullet hole in the skull. What is it, Mrs. Kell?"

His voice was hard, and he was in complete control again. She seemed disappointed that their contact had been so negative; that perhaps in a feminine logic she thought she was losing her charm. That in this hellish land a woman soon became aged from sun and wind. And hard work. And unhappiness. And the eternal threat of danger.

For danger was constant. It was in the person of bucks breaking out of the agency; of men like those who hung around Casson's Store. It was in a cow pony too fractious of a morning, and a tumble from a saddle, the crashing of a hoof against skull as you fell. A runaway team on a twisting mountain road. Pregnancy. No doctor. No midwife. The agony. This was a fear that lived with her and settled its weight upon her shoulders.

These things she explained to him as they stood in the warm sunlight. "Not that I am a coward, Mr. Rincon. But bearing a child of Kyle's— And perhaps dying for it. Or the child dying. It—it would be a waste."

"You should live safely in a place like Chicago."

"I lived in Chicago. I worked in Chicago. A woman trying to work in times like these—" Her voice trailed off, her lips straining with a pent-up bitterness. "A woman suffers insults or she doesn't work. I don't want my sister ever to have to work. A woman's place is marriage. With a husband she respects."

"I'm on my way to hire a crew, Mrs. Kell. A crew to make a roundup and count for sure the number of cows your husband has stolen."

And because she was a woman her mind took an irrelevant path and she said, "You don't like me. Because you know about me and Ed Loren. You think I'm not a good woman."

He gave a short laugh. "Who am I to judge morals? Who is anybody? I hold nothing against you."

"Mr. Rincon, I'm a desperate woman."

"This is a desperate age. It's a way of life."

"The war did it," she said in despair. "Things will never be the same. There is no decency left. No morals. This younger generation—" There was bitterness again in the voice and eyes. "I am the head of my family, so far as my sister is concerned. And yet she shows me little respect. She defies me. She is only nineteen years old and yet she wants to stand on her own feet, she says. She won't let me tell her and warn her."

"One thing about life. You live it. You live it your way or you die, or you become old and hate the years you missed."

"It's easy for you to say that. If I were a man there would be no horizon too far—" She saw the impatience on his face, and said, "I'm sorry. You're in a hurry. I just want you to understand, Mr. Rincon, that I'll go to any length in order to see this situation straightened out."

"You mean your marriage to Kyle Kell? How do you want to straighten it out? With a gun?"

She went white around the mouth. "I deserved that." She

told him about her sister. How Merry Dunn had grown lonely back in Joplin when the aunt she had lived with for so many years died suddenly. The girl had taken the little money left by the aunt to settle the woman's debts and to buy a stage ticket to Packer. "I'm afraid if I don't get my sister away something terrible will happen."

"There's nothing I can do. I'm sorry, but—"

"I know Middleton must have made a generous offer or you wouldn't have taken on such a thankless and dangerous job."

"Go on."

She licked her lips. "So he must have given you some cash." She lifted her eyes boldly to his face. "I know for a fact that Middleton opened an account for you at our so-called bank in Packer. I need five hundred dollars. I need it badly."

"A lot of people need five hundred dollars."

"It's your money, Mr. Rincon," she said, maintaining with some effort the boldness.

"But I don't use that money for my own—pleasures."

"Don't make it sound ugly. I'm trying to strike a bargain."

"And if I give you five hundred dollars?"

"If you wish, I'll come to Rifle Creek and stay."

"And leave your husband?"

"Yes. All I want is to get Merry safely away. Nothing else matters to me at all."

"Your husband would come after you."

"I wouldn't be afraid of him if you were with me." And when he just looked at her, she rushed on, "I want to send my sister back to Joplin. The situation is critical. Kyle will let me have no money. Whatever I buy must be purchased on credit in town. Can you understand the position it puts me in?"

"I feel sorry for your sister. But, as you implied, she shouldn't have come out here in the first place. She's built her own fence. She's going to have to find the gate or climb over it herself."

Her blue eyes glittered. "You think I'm not worth five hundred?"

"You mean I'm to buy a woman like I'd buy a new shirt?"

"It's been done," she said. "It's been done thousands of times."

"These things will be straightened out, Mrs. Kell, but not the way you want them to be done. Not that I'm any saint. But my life is complicated enough as it is, without bargaining for another man's wife."

"I'm going to be a pretty brazen woman, Mr. Rincon. Because I'm a desperate woman. There is no rain today. The ground is firm and dry." She looked up at him again. "And it should be simple to find a bed of grass."

And as she had done the other day, she stirred him. For it had been a long time since he had found any pleasure. The roundup, the long drive to Kansas, the ride back to Texas to tell his employers he was quitting. Then the hard trip north to this corner of Arizona.

He had quit one job because the ranch was failing. And he had come to another job equally as frustrating. After all, what did he owe Middleton? The man couldn't hang onto the two ranches his uncle had left him. And he'd not told the whole story during their talks together in Kansas. Middleton had said nothing about this Ralph Edmonds, victim of the black pneumonia. Middleton had painted a glowing picture of the Rifle Creek place that would appeal to any man who loved the cattle business. Instead, he had found chaos. And an employer broke, unless beef could be sold.

He looked at her now, tempted to take what was offered. Middleton owed him the five hundred for withholding the true picture of the situation here if for no other reason.

And then something the woman Gypsy had told him long ago crept into his mind: "Deal fairly with every human being. Make that your religion." And this from a woman who was condemned by the pious.

"I'm not a man of stone, so it's hard to turn my back on you," he said. "You're already involved with two men. Make it a third and somebody's going to get killed."

"There would be no other man but you."

He shook his head. "A man lets his guard down when he gets mixed up with a pretty woman."

"At least you've said one flattering thing to me this day," she said through her teeth. "You called me pretty."

"And you are. If there's any way—any other way I can help you, let me know."

Flushing, she turned the buggy and sent the sorrel back up the road.

Chapter 8

ANGER AND EMBARRASSMENT surged through Suella Kell as she drove back toward Mountain through the hot Arizona day. Rincon's rejection was something she hadn't counted on.

At the junction of the Rifle Creek road and the one leading to Packer she saw a horseman come suddenly out of some cottonwoods. It was Ed Loren. He lounged in the saddle, his horse blocking the road, a leg hooked over the horn.

"How's our friend Rincon?" Loren drawled.

Suella felt a gone, empty sensation in her stomach. She realized now that Loren had been following her. That he had seen her talking with the Texan.

Loren, leaning over the horn, his eyes glittering, said, "I'm takin' my time. Let him sweat. But one day I'll kill him."

"You didn't have much luck the other day."

"I was pretty drunk." He showed his teeth, as his gaze roved over her taut figure. "And I had other things on my mind. I let you talk me outa makin' sure of him."

"All right, so I'm a wanton. I've been reminded of that already today. What difference does it make?"

"You ain't turnin' to this Duffy Rincon, Suella," he said, his voice deadly quiet. He frightened her when he was like this. "Not while I'm still alive you ain't turnin' to him. You get that through your yaller head." He tapped himself on the chest. "I'm top man, understand?"

"We're through. I've already told you. I mean it!"

"Kyle would sure like to know what's been goin' on," he threatened.

"Go ahead and tell him," she challenged hopelessly. "He'll probably kill me anyway before it's over. But if you do tell

him"—she looked Loren in the eye—"you better have a gun in your hand."

"Maybe I'll just do that." But they both knew this talk of facing up to Kyle Kell was just that—so much talk. "What if I told you I know where Kyle's got that money hid," he said slyly.

"You've been leading me on with that story for a month, Ed. You don't know where Kyle's got it hidden any more than I do."

His lips tightened. "Did Rincon thank you for leavin' your rifle for him?"

"I thought he deserved a chance to live. After your cowardly attack."

"There won't be nothin' cowardly about next time. I'll blow him right outa his boots."

She shook her head slowly from side to side, wondering at the sort of men like Loren who populated this country. Thieves and murderers. She wondered what Howie Middleton would say if he could come back and see how his old friend Kyle Kell was cheating his néphew. So maybe Howie had had little use for the nephew back there in Chicago, as Kyle had told her once. Even so, he wouldn't like the way things were going. It was a sort of grim joke, some said, that Howie Middleton had left his nephew the two ranches that he wouldn't be able to hold. Kyle would milk them dry, then laugh and go on his way.

And here was Ed Loren, sitting his saddle, that arrogant smile on his lips, talking about killing a man.

"I'm tired of guns and killing," Suella said, her voice breaking. The horse in the buggy shafts grazed on a clump of grass growing beside the road.

"You figure this Duffy Rincon can make the good life for you?" Loren demanded. "The life you asked me to fix for you?"

"Get out of the road, Ed. I want to get by."

But he did not move his horse. "You'd like Kyle dead. You know you would."

She gave a quick shake of her head. "I wouldn't wish death on any man."

"Things are due to bust higher'n Saint Pete's gate around here. And there's nothin' you can do about it."

"I hope I'm gone from here by then."

"If you go, it'll be with me."

She looked toward the tumbling lower reaches of the Ramparts, the swelling tree-fringed mesas, the slash of canyons and towering boulders, and far to the east a twisting silver-bright thread of creek water.

Because she would not respond to him, he sought to hurt her through Merry. "I know something about your sister—" He laughed knowingly.

"What about my sister?" Suella demanded, her body taut with anger.

"You oughta pick her company better," Loren said. "I seen her talkin' to Billy Rooley."

Suella looked puzzled. "Who in the world is Billy Rooley?"

"Ask her." Loren reined off the road. "I'll be at the line shack, in case you want to come up." He laughed. "Tell Carl Miller I said he was to saddle a gentle hoss for you. That kid does what I tell him. And he keeps his mouth shut."

"It's disgusting the way you use that boy to do your dirty work."

"Every kid that age has got to have a hero," Loren said, his grin mocking. "Reckon he couldn't do better than me."

Suella clucked at the horse and the buggy whirled on up the road. He watched the slender back disappear into the junipers.

Thoughtfully Loren rode to where some of the crew were moving Skull cattle toward Mountain. Kell had given orders to round up any stray bunches on the Rifle Creek range and drive them north across Ellenbert's land and spot them on Mountain grass. He found Carl Miller with some of the men. He called the kid away from the others.

"How much money you got, kid?" Loren asked, seeing the kid was pleased at this meeting.

"Five dollars thereabouts."

"How'd you like to loan it to me, kid?"

"Sure." Carl Miller dug in the pocket of his grimy levis and

produced five silver dollars. He handed the coins over to Loren, who pocketed them without comment.

"Say, I been practicin'," Miller said. He put a hand to his belted gun. "You want to see me shoot?"

"Naw, you'll scare the horses." Loren ignored the kid's disappointment, and said, "Get me a couple of quarts of whisky from Casson's Store. Leave the bottles in the brush here." Loren pointed at buckbrush growing beside the road.

"I ain't got no more money—"

Loren flashed a grin. "You put that whisky on Kell's bill. He won't check it. Why should he? Middleton pays for it. You savvy, kid?"

Miller was happy to oblige.

As Miller rode off in the direction of Casson's Store, Loren thought, stupid kid. He's got oats for brains.

When Suella got home she was thankful to learn that Kyle was gone for the day. Merry was sitting in the sun. Suella thought to warn her again about this. A girl with a face tanned by the sun was unbecoming. A man liked pale-skinned women. And Merry needed a man desperately. A man who would marry her and take care of her.

Suella called Merry into the house. "Merry, who's Billy Rooley?" she asked suddenly.

Merry's eyes were wary. "I don't know."

Suella pulled off her driving gloves. "You've never lied to me. Please don't."

"He's just someone I've talked to."

Suella was vexed. "Merry, don't listen to any of these men around here. Some of them may—" Suella tried to choose her words carefully. "Some of them may try to hurt you."

"Suella, I'm hardly a child. I'm most twenty years old." Merry's dark eyes met Suella's. "I haven't been locked in a closet all these years with Aunt Nora's chinaware."

"Just what do you mean by that?" Suella snapped.

"I've listened to things that were said. And Aunt Nora was pretty outspoken."

"Things said about me, I suppose," Suella said, angered.

Merry went over to the stove and busied herself wiping up a trace of biscuit batter spilled that morning.

Suella's lips twisted. "I know full well what Aunt Nora must have said about me. Dear Aunt Nora. Well, I did intend to marry that boy. But he was drowned accidentally—"

She looked at Merry's back, wanting now to explain since the painful subject had finally come up. "It's been done thousands, millions of times, I suppose. I'm not saying it's right. If the baby had lived, I would have kept it. And I wouldn't have been ashamed. Do you understand?"

Merry put the rag aside and turned. "Suella, I don't care what you've done. You've been good to me. You supported Aunt Nora—"

"It was my duty. Who else would have supported her?"

"She had no right to say those things about you." Merry looked down at the dirt floor. "I had no right to listen."

"You'd have heard it elsewhere," Suella said, "as you probably did. The whole town knew. The whole town condemned me."

"It was terrible of them to do it."

"You've got to remember one thing, Merry. We live according to a code. Either we do that or we go back to living in caves."

Merry looked at her in surprise. "I never heard you talk like that before."

Suella thought of the newspaperman she had known briefly in Chicago and how he would tell her what was wrong with the world.

Merry looked concerned. "Does Kyle know—about the baby?"

Suella's shoulders shrugged. "He tricked me into telling him most of it." She rubbed her jaw, as if reliving the night when Kyle had talked her into revealing her past, saying it didn't matter what she'd done. And then, when she unburdened herself, hitting her.

"We've talked enough about the past," Suella said firmly. "My only concern now is your future. Things will be different with Rincon here. I think he is the one man who can keep Kyle on a tight rein."

"I don't know this Rincon," Merry said, "but I have the feeling I wouldn't like him. He's a gunman. He—he's just like Ed Loren." She gave Suella a look that brought a flush to the older sister's face.

Suella realized suddenly that with all of Merry's inexperience in a brutal world she knew one thing—she knew about Ed Loren. All about him.

Suella got a broom and to give herself something to do swept the boot-scuffed floor. "Maybe in five years I can put in a wood floor for you," Kyle had said. "Five years." My God, she thought. In five years I'll be a hag. If I'm not in my grave.

Things were bad enough until Merry came. But her presence here seemed to make Kyle worse. And she couldn't tell whether it was because of the letter he had received from Middleton, telling of Rincon's job of taking over the Rifle Creek place, or because of Merry's unexpected arrival. Merry and the letter had arrived the same day.

Sometimes Kyle acted as if he hated the girl. And other times— Well, it scared her to death.

She closed her eyes, and with the bright sun flooding the room, warming her face, she made a vow. Rincon had rejected her today. But he was her only chance. She would have to try again. Either it was Rincon or it would be destruction for herself and perhaps Merry. And she knew that could never happen. Never.

Suddenly, through the side window, she saw Charlie Penn riding hell-bent into the yard. And as the lank Skull man saw her, he yelled as he flashed past the window: "There's been a killin', Mrs. Kell!"

Chapter 9

EARLIER THAT DAY Duffy was in Casson's Store, waiting for a chance to get the big man alone to talk some business. The place cleared out and then a kid entered. Casson said it was Carl Miller, Ed Loren's shadow.

Casson put two quarts of whisky in a burlap bag for the kid and made him sign his name on a slip of paper. Casson said to Duffy, "This kid thinks Loren is the biggest thing that ever came over the mountain."

Duffy looked at Miller, seeing a tall, stringy kid, tough-acting in a way. "Loren's not much of a man to tie to, kid," Duffy said.

Miller wheeled, the burlap bag clutched in one hand, the other hovering above an ivory-butted gun with roses carved in the plates. "Just what do you mean by that, mister?"

Duffy wished he'd kept his mouth shut, but the damage was done now. "Loren tried to kill me the other day. When I had my back to him."

"You're a liar!"

There was a tightening of Duffy Rincon's brown face. "I'll take that because you're a kid," Duffy said. "When you get a little older, stop and think before you call a man a liar to his face. You might have to back it up with a gun."

"I can do that. I'll tell Ed you was makin' talk about him. Just what is your name, mister?"

Duffy told him, and when the kid hesitated, Casson said, "Take that whisky and get out of here, kid."

Miller shot the big man a narrow-eyed look, then, the bottles clanking in the sack, he strode out.

After he had gone Casson said, "That kid's goin' to get himself killed someday on account of Loren."

"How about that crew?" Duffy asked. "I need men."

"I can get you a dozen men tomorrow." Casson put the palms of his large hands down on the bar. "If you come in with me, that is."

Duffy said, "I told you I'm not a thief."

"You got the world by the tail, Rincon. You an' me could push Kyle Kell into the brush and run off every damn head of beef on Skull. On top of that we could make Kell dig up the money he's got buried. And we could—well, we just might shake a few dollars out of Randolph Middleton the Second."

Duffy let nothing show on his face. "You'd have to go clear to Chicago to do anything to Middleton."

Casson rubbed a hand over his scarred chin, his eyes amused. "This Joe Rand fella that was here. I done some askin' in Packer about him. He told somebody on the stage that he hailed from Chicago himself."

"What's so odd about that?"

"This Joe Rand might just know Middleton," Casson said. "Or maybe Joe Rand is Middleton himself. He comes from a rich family. We could hide him out and write a letter to Chicago and somebody might be willin' to go as high as ten thousand dollars to see him again."

Duffy said, "Joe Rand's a cattle buyer. He was in Chicago on business."

"That Joe Rand don't know beef hump from manure," Casson said. "If he's a cattle buyer, I'm queen of the cribs." Casson leaned close. "I'll give you a few days to think it over, Rincon. It's you and me workin' together."

"Why don't you take a gun and go after Kell yourself?" Duffy snapped. "You seem to have the thing all planned out."

"I can handle Kyle Kell with my fists. Or with a shotgun. But I ain't fool enough to go against him any other way. That's where you shine, Rincon. You're the boy for the job."

"Pay Ed Loren enough and he'd likely cross Kell and do the job for you."

Casson shook his head. "Loren's almighty fast with a gun hammer, but he's scared of Kyle. I know."

With this information planted back in his mind, Duffy said, "I'll think over what you've said."

He went out and got his horse. Well, Casson could mull this over for a few days and wonder if they would team up. In the meantime Duffy intended going clear to Prescott for a crew if that was necessary. And to hell with Mike Casson.

As he rode for the Rifle Creek place Duffy thought of all he had learned this day. It was disquieting that Casson was suspicious of the man calling himself Joe Rand. He quietly cursed Middleton for telling anyone on the stage that he was from Chicago. He sensed Casson wasn't altogether sure of Middleton's identity. But a little probing would turn the man's suspicions into fact.

When he got back to Rifle Creek, Duffy did not tell Middleton that Casson had halfway guessed his identity. But he did caution the man to stay out of sight if strangers came around.

He told Middleton he would have to ride to Prescott and get a crew.

"Isn't there some law here?" Middleton said. "Someone who can see that riders aren't afraid to take a job?"

"There's no law, nothing." Duffy voiced something that had been on his mind during the ride from Casson's Store. "I need five hundred dollars' advance on my salary."

Middleton looked surprised. "That's a lot of money."

"I want to give it to Mrs. Kell," Duffy said, deciding to speak as plainly as he deemed advisable.

"Give it to her?" Middleton shook his head. Whiskers were beginning to darken his jaws, making him look a little rugged. "You must have taken a fancy to the woman."

Duffy ignored the thrust, and told Middleton about the scene with Suella Kell. Eliminating her offer, but disclosing her fright and her concern for the safety of her sister. "With Mrs. Kell and her sister out of here it'll make things a lot easier. We can go after Kell and not have to worry about a woman getting shot by mistake in the fighting. Those things happen, you know."

Middleton lost color. "This is turning out to be a bloody business. I had no idea—"

"You had a lot of ideas, Middleton," Duffy said sharply, "about me coming out here to kill Kell for you."

"No, no, I never intended that." Middleton's shoulders sagged. "Would you believe me if I said the only money I have is what is in my pockets? Less than a hundred dollars cash? Plus what I deposited for you in the bank at Packer. That's why I came out here. Unless we sell some cattle, I'm bankrupt. The situation is desperate."

Swearing softly, Duffy clenched his hands. With what he had spent for a saddler, a team, wagon, supplies, and a rifle, there was about fifty dollars left in the Packer bank.

"Why didn't you tell me things were so bad off?"

"I thought you could work miracles, I guess," Middleton said with a wan, apologetic smile.

Duffy was disgusted. "You went through your uncle Howie's money in one hell of a hurry," Duffy said scornfully. "He's only been dead two years."

"There was no cash," Middleton said. "Just the ranches."

"You can borrow on them."

"I already have," Middleton said, then added bitterly, "I've used up the money paying Kell's bills he sends every month." He sank to one of the kegs they used as chairs, and stared despondently at the dirt floor. "There's no chance to borrow more money."

Duffy felt his dream slipping away—his dream of working hard for a few years then returning to Texas to start ranching in a small way.

"I relied on Kell because my uncle did," Middleton said.

"Relied on him hell. You knew you couldn't fire him because of your uncle's will. Kell's been sitting here picking your pockets and laughing about it. So you send a foreman out last year and Kell either killed him or had it done. Then you hire me. But you don't tell me the facts. That's what I hold against you."

"I didn't think you'd come, if you knew how things stood." Middleton sighed. "It was a long gamble and I guess I've lost."

Duffy stared at the bewildered young man and felt a faint surge of sympathy. "If this girl you told me about thinks enough of you, she won't care whether you're broke or not."

"Clarice might be willing to marry me, but her parents would never permit it if I lost my financial standing."

"Then she's not worth much," Duffy said through his teeth. He managed a grin when Middleton showed a faint anger at the remark against his fiancée. "We'll find a market for beef. And when we do, you'll be able to pay off your debts—"

"Speaking of beef," Middleton said, snapping his fingers, "I almost forgot. While you were gone, some riders came by. I hid in the cottonwoods beyond the barn. But I saw they had a bunch of cattle."

"Which way did they go?" Duffy demanded, and Middleton pointed north. Dropping some shells into his pocket, Duffy carried his rifle out to his horse. He told Middleton to stay out of sight. Despite the man's protests against staying behind, Duffy had the final word. He rode without Middleton.

He caught up with four Skull riders moving about a hundred head of Skull beef in the general direction of the Mountain Ranch. When they saw him coming, they dismounted and rolled cigarettes while the cows moved on, hunting grass.

Duffy swung down, introduced himself. The men exchanged glances. Spokesman for the group, the lank Charlie Penn, said, "What you want, Rincon?"

"This is Rifle Creek Ranch," Duffy said quietly. "Those cows stay here."

Penn swallowed nervously. "Kell ordered us to push 'em to Mountain."

"You'll leave 'em here," Duffy said.

"But Kell said—"

"I don't give a damn what Kell said!"

Penn gave the others an uneasy glance. They wore patched and dusty clothing, their eyes were red from dust. Only Penn wore a belt gun. The other carried rifles in saddle boots. The four Skull horses stood with heads together, tails switching flies.

"Kell ain't far off," Penn said, and licked his lips. "Mebby you better tell him."

"I'm telling you," Duffy said.

"Kell's even got Pap Walcott in the saddle. He's usin' every man to push cows—"

Duffy made a cutting motion with his left hand; his right he kept near his gun. It was apparent to Duffy that these men were no gun hands. These were riders trying to earn a dollar, trying to stay alive at the only job they knew. But you had to be on guard all the same.

Duffy let some of the truculence out of his voice. "Kell knows better than to take beef from Rifle Creek and move 'em to Mountain." Then he added, "Even if he's been doing it regular since Howie Middleton died."

Penn's Adam's apple jerked in a thin throat. "I sure don't want no trouble with you, Rincon, but Kell said—"

"Don't move any cattle off this rangel"

"The boss is goin' to be all-fired mad," Penn said solemnly.

"Let him be mad. He's had things his own way too long. I'm running Rifle Creek, not Kell."

The four men talked it over and at last Penn said, "We don't figure to get shot up over a few head of beef. But Kell ain't goin' to take it so easy."

"How much is Kell paying you boys?" Duffy asked.

"Twenty-five a month and found."

"That's not much money, is it?"

"Well, a man's got a bunk roof over his head and a full belly and a little whisky and boot money. What else is there in bad times like these?"

"I'll pay forty dollars," Duffy said. "Help me round up beef, drive them to market, and then we'll settle up."

"There ain't no beef market around here."

"I'll find one," Duffy said. "I need good men. Men who aren't particularly loyal to Kell."

"Forty dollars a month," Penn breathed. It brought a flush of excitement to the faces of the four men. They began to talk, gesturing, arguing. One of them, younger than the rest, sandy-haired, his plump face dark with freckles, said, "For that kind of money I'll work for Satan himself. Rincon, you got yourself a man."

The enthusiasm on Charlie Penn's narrow face turned to

worry. "Wait a minute, Tom," he cautioned the rider, then looked at Duffy. "Maybe some of us would admire to pull stakes, but you don't know Kell. Likely none of us would live long enough to spend any of that pay. He'd make us suffer plenty for leavin' him."

Duffy felt his cheeks grow hot. "You aren't slaves. You've got a right to come and go as you please."

Tom Hickam took a hitch at his belt and gave Penn a slanted look. "I ain't no slave," he said. "That's for sure."

Penn gave a worried shake of his head. "You better think it over, Tom. You better think it over good an' long an' quiet."

And while Tom Hickam did his thinking, he gradually lost the stubborn set of his features. "Reckon mebby you're right, Charlie," he said dolefully.

Duffy said, "This Kyle Kell must throw an awful black shadow to scare cowhands like you."

"It-ain't a matter of bein' scared." Charlie Penn spat tobacco juice that made a soft brown crater in the dust. "We just figure to live a little while, that's all. There's goin' to be hell shapin' up an' we know it. You an' Kell are goin' to chew each other's throats. If you win the fight, then we'll sure be glad to talk about comin' to work for you, Rincon."

"Might be a little late then," Duffy snapped. "You better think it over. I'm going to have a crew if I've got to send clear to Texas for one. You pass the word to Kell. And tell him to leave cows on Rifle Creek alone."

The cattle spreading out across the basin covered up the sound of the approaching rider. Duffy was not aware anyone was coming up on them until he saw Charlie Penn's mouth open in surprise.

"Ed Loren," Penn breathed, and looked hard beyond Duffy's shoulder.

Chapter 10

FEELING A FLICK OF TENSION in him, Duffy turned. It was Loren all right, drawing up now, sitting the saddle of his black horse some fifty yards away. Now Loren came on at a walk, holding the horse in. Ten yards away he dismounted, a tight grin slanting across his handsome face. He slapped the black horse away.

"Thought I seen you down here, Rincon," he drawled, and turned to the others. "What's the matter, boys? This Texas ramrod givin' you some tough talk?"

Penn said, "I heard you got fired."

"Don't look much like it," Loren said.

"Glad you come by then," Penn said, and looked a little relieved that he was able to shift responsibility. "We got orders from Kell to move them cows." He waved a hand at the cattle bunched now at the grass. "Rincon says we can't move nothin' off Rifle Creek. What do you say about it, Loren?"

"I say Rincon's got not one damn thing to say about it."

"Careful, Loren," Duffy warned. "You're backing into a bear trap. You're going to have it snapping at your ankles in about another minute."

Loren looked him over insolently. "You don't look tough enough to bear trap me, Rincon. You look just like a hog-gutted Texan."

"I'm foreman of this ranch," Duffy said. "What I say goes around here."

"I'm segundo of Mountain. What I say goes, too."

Slowly Duffy lifted a forefinger and touched the gash above his ear. "You just about ended it the other day, didn't you, Loren?"

Loren nodded. "Maybe it's better this way."

"This way you can look me in the eye. Instead of shooting from the brush when my back is turned."

Duffy heard the muttered exclamations of the four cowhands standing in a tight group a little to his right. Duffy edged away and Tom Hickam said, "Don't worry about us gettin' behind you, Rincon. Nobody's goin' to climb your back."

Loren looked past Duffy to the chunky sandy-haired rider. "When I'm through with Rincon we'll see how you look with a pistol barrel across your nose."

Hickam looked worried, but said nothing.

Duffy said, "Get at it, Loren."

Loren laughed. "I been watching you from the hills. I been waitin' to get right. Looks like this is it."

"I said get at it."

"You gettin' edgy, Rincon?"

"Why didn't you try for me with a rifle? From behind a tree? That's the way you bushwhackers usually work."

Loren made an exaggerated gesture for the four Skull riders to move aside. "I don't want you boys maybe to get shot up by mistake. Especially I don't want nothin' to happen to you, Tom. Hell, I want to cut you up a little."

"You're a dead man, Loren," Duffy said, and hoped his voice sounded as hard as he tried to make it. He was facing an admitted gunman. A man who earned his pay by killing. And standing a little to one side were four men who worked on Loren's side of the fence. Even though Tom Hickam had voiced a tenuous encouragement that no one would climb his back, still the other three might decide to move in. If everything went wrong for Loren, that is. But Loren had the upper hand, Duffy knew. And Loren realized it. It was five men against one, really. Four men if you discounted Hickam.

Loren, smiling, said, "Rincon, you ain't got the chance of a grasshopper in a chicken yard. We got you boxed."

Duffy said nothing. The sun was very bright, lacing through oaks that grew thickly on the slopes at the edge of the basin. In that moment as he faced Ed Loren, with not fifteen feet separating them, Duffy knew what it takes for one man to conquer another. A man had to have his wits and his nerves

under control. He had to be supremely confident of his ability. And Duffy this day had none of these qualities. He had been bitterly disappointed in this job he had signed on to handle. He had suffered a head wound that still made him dizzy at times. And here was Ed Loren, the smile a little tighter now.

And Duffy realized that Loren was angling a little to one side. Making Duffy turn and face him. And in a minute Duffy would have the sun in his eyes.

Duffy said, "That's far enough. Take another step and you won't have legs under you."

"Tough," was all Loren could say. "Texas tough." He did not take another step. The smile was gone now. He turned, glaring at the four Skull riders. "You with me on this or not?"

Charlie Penn said, "It's your fight, Loren."

"Yellow bastards," Loren said.

Deliberately he turned on his heel and stalked toward the black horse, taking short, angry steps.

"There'll be another day, Rincon," he said over a narrow shoulder. "You can sweat a little. I got plenty of time to see what a Texas man looks like pulled inside out."

Just before Loren reached his mount there was the sound of approaching horses. Duffy felt sweat break out on the back of his neck. He did not dare turn to see who was riding up. Loren looked beyond Duffy and a little to one side, a smile breaking out on his face.

Then into Duffy's range of vision came the newcomers, Kyle Kell, an old man, and another rider with straw-colored hair. Kell and the man reined in, sat staring a moment.

Kell said, "What the hell's goin' on, Rincon?"

Loren laughed, the sound almost hysterical. "This ain't your lucky day, Rincon. This ain't your lucky day at all."

Kell jerked his thumb at the four riders. "I told you boys to move them cows. How come you're standin' around here?"

None of the men answered. Kell turned to Loren. "What you figure to do, Ed? Eat this Texian for breakfast?"

"I was just about to salt him, Kyle."

"You were about to run away," Duffy said.

Loren lost his smile. "I never run yet from a Texian." He moved a little away from the black horse.

"You picked a bad time for this, Rincon," Kell said, pleased.

"I picked nothing," Duffy said without looking at him. "I'm riding out of here. I'm not fool enough to draw a gun and expect I won't have to fight some of you when it's over."

"It's your fight, Rincon," Kell said. "None of my boys will mix in."

"Glad you said it, Kyle," the old man said. "Or I'd have told him myself."

Duffy slanted a look at the man, seeing Kell glaring at him. The old man's gray hair stuck out from under an ancient hat. His face was seamed from a lifetime of facing summer heat and winter wind from the back of a horse.

"Keep outa this, Pap," Kell snapped. "I do the talkin' around here."

Pap Walcott met Kell's eyes. "There won't be no back-shootin' today if Rincon's lucky enough to cut down Loren."

Loren made a half-turn, his face ugly. "By God, Pap, you think I can't tame this Texian? When he's in the box I'm goin' to bust your liver. You stink to me, Pap. You stink like a mouldy skunk."

Pap Walcott showed broken teeth in a half-grin. "You tryin' to talk yourself to death, Ed?"

Kell cut in, "Pap, you're shovin' your nose too far in the stove. You're goin' to get it burned."

"I'm havin' my way in this, Kyle," the old man said softly. "Let Loren and Rincon fight it out if they're a mind. And nobody buys in when it's over."

"Thanks, old man," Duffy said. "But I've had my fill of Loren for today. Not that I don't believe what you say. But you're one against many. The boys might figure to take things into their own hands."

He started backing toward his horse. Charlie Penn and the three hands with him had edged toward Kell and the two riders, to get out of a possible cross fire. Now they breathed easier. The danger seemed over. Rincon was backing to his mount. And Loren seemed unable to make up his mind what to do.

"I'd sure like to know what Pap's got on you, Kyle," Loren

said, his lips twisting. "It must be somethin' real good. He leads you around on a rope like you was a trick hoss."

Kell rose a little in the stirrups, his face flaming. All the men were watching to see how he would take this. Finally Kell settled back in the saddle, but his face lost none of the rage put there by Loren's insult.

"You take from Pap," Loren pressed on, "what you never take from no other man!"

"Shut up, Ed! Goddamit, shut up!" Kell looked as if he might draw his gun and let go at the segundo who stood rigid, handsome face a little pale, giving him hell in a basket about old Pap Walcott.

Kell smothered his wrath. "What you doin' down here anyhow, Ed? I told you to stay at the line shack!"

"You tell me not one damn thing to do," Loren said through his teeth. "Besides, I got curious. I know a few things about a married woman and an hombre—" Loren turned, giving Duffy a knowing look that Kell could not fail to interpret.

Duffy had halted now, five feet from his horse. A drop of sweat stung his eye. He tried to blink it away. "Go easy with that kind of talk," Duffy told the segundo.

Loren looked surprised. "I don't know what you mean, Rincon," he said, his voice mocking. "Unless it was that I seen you an' a pretty woman together a few hours back—"

"You didn't see me with any woman," Duffy said.

Loren gave a soft laugh. "I can guess, can't I?" Loren turned to Kell. "Here's the way it is, Kyle—"

Duffy said, "I'm getting out of here. Don't anybody try and stop me. Don't make me kill one of you to prove my point that I don't intend to be stopped."

Pap Walcott spoke up. "You better ride if you're a mind to, Rincon. You'll never have a better chance."

The old man sounded disappointed, Duffy thought. The hell with him. He wasn't going to put on any hero play with Ed Loren just to make an old man happy. There was bad blood between Loren and this Pap Walcott, it was plain to see. Pap would undoubtedly enjoy seeing Loren's boot toes curled up to the sun.

Duffy turned to pick up the reins of his horse and Pap Walcott shouted, "Look out!"

The yell sent his horse swinging away. Duffy dropped to one knee. A banging shot ripped so close to his face he could feel its lethal breath. Off balance, he fell sideways as Loren fired again. This time the heel of his left boot was nicked by the bullet. As he tried to spring up, his left foot, numbed from the shock of the bullet, refused to support his weight. He fell, rolling, his gun out. Loren, both feet spread, was trying to center his rolling target.

Loren was dropping the hammer on his third shell when Duffy fired from the ground. The impact of the bullet from Duffy's gun swung Loren around, lifting him to his toes. Loren's revolver was fired into the ground, shooting straight down into his own leg, blowing off a kneecap. And even desperately hurt as he was, Loren tried mightily to lift his gun again. Duffy, prone on the ground, let fall the hammer. The roar of the weapon cut off Loren's scream. Loren tipped forward, his legs dead under him. He fell face down into the dirt.

Duffy sprang up, trembling, the raw taste of fear in his mouth. He saw that Pap Walcott had drawn a gun to cover Kell. But Kell was paying no attention to the old man. He was staring dumfounded at Ed Loren, loose on the ground. Duffy got into the saddle; his horse was skittish from the shouting and the gunfire. It reared, forelegs pawing the air. It almost crashed down on Ed Loren, but Duffy reined it aside just in time. Not that it would have made much difference. Loren was as dead as he'd ever be. The back of his skull lay open to the sun.

"Thanks, old man," Duffy said hoarsely. The old man said nothing. The rest of them just stared at him, awed. Kell was still looking at Loren, heavy body lifted a little in the saddle.

Duffy backed his horse, and then twenty yards away he holstered his revolver and drew the rifle. But none of them came after him.

He kept at an angle so he could watch them. But they were paying no attention. They were all gathered around Ed Loren's body.

Duffy turned his horse toward Rifle Creek headquarters. He felt sick at having to kill a man. His last bullet had caught Loren in the cheekbone, making a small entry; it was the exit that had done the damage. Loren's eyes had been glazing over even as he fell.

It was a mile away before the tension suddenly went out of Duffy. He booted the rifle. The back of his shirt was coldly damp from his perspiration. It had been close, very close. His mouth was dry and he longed for a drink.

Three times Loren had tried for him. The day of the ambush, the night in Casson's Store. And today.

Loren's luck ran in threes, so it seemed. At least his bad luck did. He'd never have a chance to buy into another game and test his luck.

Loren wouldn't try again. But how many others would try before this thing was settled?

Chapter 11

CHARLIE PENN was the first rider in the Mountain yard, hurrying to tell the other members of the crew what had happened. He saw Mrs. Kell at a window and shouted that there had been a killing. Then he went on down to the bunkhouse and was just dismounting when Kell and the rest of the men who had witnessed the gun fight came tearing up. Kell warned Penn to keep his mouth shut about the shooting of Loren. He also warned the others.

Pap Walcott started for the cookshack to begin supper. Kell had ordered Loren buried where he had fallen. Under his arm, Kell had Loren's hat, his gun, and shell belt. All the way he had ridden, murder crowding his heart. Now he told Pap Walcott to wait.

He caught the old man by a thin arm, jerked him around. "We could have finished it, damn you, Pap!"

"Don't cuss me, Kyle," the old man said, his eyes hard.

"Rincon would be deader'n that bay hoss I shot if you hadn't butted in. What was the idea?"

"The idea was that I don't like to see murder done." The old man pulled free of Kell's fingers and tramped on down to the bunkhouse.

Kell rode the crew hard for the rest of the day, giving them the dirty jobs every cowhand hates, cleaning the barn, whitewashing a fence. Everyone knew something had happened that day, but none of those who had witnessed the shooting told what they knew. Kell had given his orders not to talk.

Kell ate with the men that night. Later he played poker in the bunkhouse and cleaned them as usual. Only when it was after midnight did he go down to the main house. He was in a sour mood. Everything was going wrong. Everything!

His only consolation was in watching Merry. Looking at her when he pretended to doze at the table. Watching her at the stove when she helped Suella. Watching her movements as she thought she was unobserved; throwing her hands high over her head to reach something on a shelf. Tightening of her dress against her fine bosom. In a dark corridor of his mind the girl assumed the personality and the beauty of another girl he had tried desperately to, in turn, hate and forget. A girl named Maria Campo. Now with Merry sleeping in the same house Kell spent many hours awake. Why couldn't a man have something young and fresh? Something worth fighting for?

He lighted a lamp. The bedroom door was closed. He saw that Suella was sitting up on the buffalo robes, her eyes watching him.

"Kyle, is anything the matter?" she asked. And when he did not answer, she said, "Penn shouted something about there being a shooting today."

He dropped Loren's hat and gun belt on the makeshift bed. He picked up the lamp, held it close so he could study her handsome face framed by braids of yellow hair. See the stricken look in her eyes as she recognized hat and gun.

Kell ground some coffee beans, flung them into a pot on top of old grounds, filled the pot with water from a tin pitcher on the back of the stove. He threw wood in the stove and in a moment it caught from the coals. Then he sank to a hide-bottomed chair and watched her. At last he nodded at the closed bedroom door. "Did you get that gun away from her like I told you?"

"She needs it for protection."

"Against me, I s'pose." He grinned, looked knowingly for several moments at the bedroom door. "I got a way to get even with you," he said, turning back to his wife. "A good way to get even."

She sat up straight in the bed. "Stay away from her, Kyle. I mean it."

Kell got up from the chair. "Ain't you goin' to ask about the gun and the hat?" He pointed at the articles he had dropped on the bed.

"They belong to Ed Loren," she said.

"Loren's dead."

Her head snapped back as if he had struck her across the face. "I can't say I'm sorry," she said at last.

"I was aimin' to ask Ed some questions about you an' him. But reckon I won't be askin' 'em now." He snatched up hat and gun belt and went outside.

It was three o'clock in the morning. He stood in the bunkhouse, his back to the door. He lit a lamp and put it on the table where they had played poker. The men were sleepily sitting up in their bunks.

He looked around, enjoying that certain sense of power he felt when these men shivered before his eyes. On the way back from the shooting, Penn, in seeking to ingratiate himself, had spoken briefly to Kell about Tom Hickam. Now Kell placed Loren's articles on the table, wheeled toward Hickam's bunk. He smiled at the chunky freckle-faced man who regarded him unflinchingly. "I hear you want to quit us, Tom."

Hickam glared across the bunkhouse at the lank Charlie Penn, who refused to meet his eyes. Hickam looked at Kell and said, "I s'pose you'll give Charlie a bonus for tellin' stories like a schoolgirl—"

Kell hit him in the face. As Hickam rocked back from the blow Kell got him by his sand-colored hair, dragged him out of the bunk to the floor. He kicked him in the face, hauled him up by the hair of the head again, and belted him cruelly in the stomach. Hickam fell, retching. Kell caught him by the collar of his gray underwear, hauled him along the dirt floor, then kicked him out the door and into the yard.

"You know where Rifle Creek is," Kell told the half-unconscious man crumpled in the dirt. "Walk there! You take a hoss and I'll hang you to the first tree!"

Then Kell went back into the bunkhouse, looking around the big room. "Anybody else want to work for Duffy Rincon?"

Nobody said anything, they just looked at him, their faces pale in the lamplight. There was no telling what path Kell's rage would take. Here he had acted as if nothing was the matter. He had played poker with Hickam tonight, joshed

with him. And then in the middle of the night he had suddenly turned on the man and beaten him. And kicked him out into the cold mountain night. To walk barefoot and clad thinly, to walk the weary miles to Rifle Creek.

Kell enjoyed the look of shock on their faces. It was one of his few pleasures these days. Aside from hiding the money he got from selling Middleton's beef to the Amherst Brothers in Prescott.

Picking up gun belt and hat from the table, Kell walked to Carl Miller's bunk. The kid regarded him nervously.

"I done somethin' wrong, Mr. Kell?"

"You hitched up that bay hoss to my wife's buggy the other day. A balky bay horse—"

"And you killed the bay," Pap Walcott cut in sourly. "Leave the kid alone, Kyle."

Kell ignored the old man. He looked at the sixteen-year-old face, tanned and unlined, looking worried now. "You like Ed Loren, kid?"

"He's my best friend."

"You do his dirt. You keep his bunk clean. You take care of his hosses. You shine his boots and fetch him whisky."

Miller, looking thoughtful, dropped from the upper bunk to the floor. He was tall as Kell but no thicker through the body than one of the older man's thighs. The kid seemed to be pondering these Loren services that Kell had lumped together. He seemed to waver, then stubbornness touched his eyes. "Loren teaches me things."

"Like shooting a gun?"

"I'm good at it, Mr. Kell. I'm goin' to keep right on till I got me a regular ridin' job."

Kell, rubbing his jaw, said, "What would you do for Loren, kid?"

"Just about anything." The kid nodded at Pap Walcott, who stood shivering in his underwear. "Loren and Pap here are the only ones that ever give a damn about me."

Walcott gave Kell an angry look. "Why you draggin' your loop for the kid this early in the mornin'?"

"I've taken enough off you, Pap. Don't push your luck, old man."

Walcott stepped back, an old, almost-forgotten hardness flashing across his eyes. The men in the bunkhouse, those who had been here at Skull ranch for a long time, remembered the stories they had heard. How this old man had once ridden with Kell and Howie Middleton in Mexico. And how something had happened down there that none of them would ever talk about.

In his day Pap had been a tough man. "Don't get too big for your bedroll, Kyle," Pap said, peering up at the bearded face. "If you do, you'll find your head out of the covers and your face in the rain."

For a moment the pair looked at each other in the growing tension that seemed to be almost a sound that touched the nerves of every man in the bunkhouse.

"Remember what I said, Kyle," Pap Walcott said. "Leave the kid alone."

Kell backed down a little, his tone softening. "I ain't mad at Carl." He looked at the kid who stood uncertainly, unable to figure whether Kell was going to beat him up like he had Tom Hickam or whether the boss would give him a medal.

"I owe you somethin' for that bay hoss, kid."

"I didn't know it was a balky hoss—"

"You helped bring things to a head, kid." Kell grinned through his beard. "I'm givin' you a chance for a ridin' job, kid. Get your clothes on, boy, meet me outside in five minutes."

Kell wheeled, glared around the room at the men sitting up in the bunks, their faces showing the strain of insecurity. "Anything wrong with the rest of you rollin' out?" Kell demanded. "A little dark never hurt a cowhand none. Besides, from all the loafin' you do, there ain't a man of you don't owe me time."

When Kell went outside, Walcott got Carl Miller by an arm. "Don't let him talk you into anything, kid," the old man warned in a low voice. He started to tell him about Loren being dead. But Kell had warned against this. Kell had his own ways of revealing news he wanted the crew to know. And Pap, bone-weary, decided he'd brushed against Kell enough for one twelve-hour period.

"Kyle, stop it!" Suella faced him, her eyes frightened and angry.

Kell lunged across the room, caught her by the arms, and swung her around so sharply a braid came unpinned and flopped across her shoulder like a length of yellow rope. "You and Ed behind my back! And this Rincon—"

The bedroom door opened and Merry, her face taut, wearing her shirt and leather skirt, came into the kitchen. "Breakfast smells good," she said, trying to pretend there was no fear, no tension in her voice. She went over to a pan of beef strips Suella had put on to fry.

Kell turned Suella loose and crossed to Merry. He caught the girl's chin in a big hand. "Can't you say good mornin' to your brother-in-law?"

Merry's dark eyes avoided his intent gaze. "Good morning," she said, and removed his hand from her chin. She swept back a lock of dark hair from her face and set out plates and tin forks and knives on the table.

"You better let me have the gun," Kell said. "It ain't healthy for a young gal to have somethin' like that. You might shoot your pretty self."

"I'll keep the gun, if you don't mind, brother-in-law." Kell's eyes narrowed at this defiance. "I was just tellin' your sister that Ed Loren got himself killed yesterday."

Merry looked surprised and darted a look at Suella that Kell did not fail to notice. "I'm sorry to hear that," she said, and walked over to the table where Suella was cutting out biscuits.

Kell went to the door. "I'll go eat with the boys." He leveled a finger at Merry. "When I come back tonight I want that gun on the table there. Understand?"

Merry said nothing. Suella, wiping floured hands on her apron, said, "Can you let me have some money, Kyle? I need some things in town—"

"Put it on my bill. You get no money!" He went out, the door crashing shut behind him.

"I made him mad," Merry said. "My coming here has completely ruined everything for you."

"It was ruined a long time ago." They ate their breakfast in silence.

Merry said, when the dishes were done, "Do you feel anything for Ed Loren? Now that he's dead?" Suella just sat stiffly on the edge of the table, her eyes bleak. "He was going to take you away, wasn't he?"

Suella picked at a splinter on the table. "You don't know what desperation is. I pray to God you never learn."

"We'll leave here together," Merry said.

Suella shook her head. "You'll go just as soon as I can get my hands on some money. There would be nothing but trouble if I left with you."

"Kyle would follow you?"

Suella nodded. "Not because he loves me, but because he can't stand to lose anything."

"But what about you?"

"Remember this, Merry," Suella said. "My only purpose in life is to make sure that as long as you live you have a woman's most priceless possession. Her pride." Then Suella said, "I'm going to make one last attempt to get Kyle to act like a human being. I'm going to have a long talk with Pap Walcott."

"What good will that do?"

"For one thing, Kyle is a little afraid of him. I don't know why. Something that goes back to their days together in Mexico. Maybe Pap can use his influence and make Kyle straighten out before any more men are killed."

"You're blaming yourself for Ed Loren dying," Merry said.

"Maybe it's punishment for what I did behind Kyle's back."

"You mean you'd stay here and live as his wife? What made you change, Suella?"

"It was talking about pride, I guess. I'm Kyle's wife. If he'll meet me halfway, I'll try and forget the past."

"You couldn't stay here. Not after all he's done to you. It has nothing to do with pride."

"A woman who deserts a husband hasn't much pride. Much of anything unless she can honestly try to work things out."

"Divorce is common now," Merry said. "I knew a woman in

Joplin, after you left there. She divorced her husband. Of course it was a scandal, but—"

Suella changed the subject abruptly. She knew she would never stay with Kyle. But she wanted Merry to have a chance to get away before there was more bloodshed. Maybe Pap could get Kyle to hold off the terror for a week or so until she could find some way to get her hands on some money.

"Pap gave you that gun, didn't he?" Suella asked.

"Yes."

"Don't let Kyle know it. As much as he doesn't like to cross the old man I'd hate to think what he might do if he found out the truth about that revolver."

Merry said, "I won't tell him." She forced a smile. "I wish you luck, Suella, in whatever it is you're trying to do."

And something in her sister's voice caused Suella to say, "Don't try to plan anything on your own, you hear? I'll work things out for you."

Merry went to her room and under her breath she said, "I'm big enough to stand on my own two feet. I've brought enough trouble to you. I know how to solve my problem."

Chapter 12

AS DUFFY WAS GETTING READY to ride to Prescott to try to line up a crew, they had a visitor at Rifle Creek. Duffy and the man known as Joe Rand had gotten the yard cleaned up, firewood cut. It was the first real work Randolph Middleton II had ever done. His hands were blistered from handling the ax; there were blisters on his feet from walking in high-heeled boots. And he was stiff and sore from being pitched twice by a cow pony.

"These aren't like the horses I rode in Chicago," he complained.

Their visitor appeared suddenly as Duffy was saddling up. It was the old man, Pap Walcott.

Walcott sat his saddle, forearms crossed on the horn, studying Middleton. He looked at Middleton's new clothing, stained now, his sunburned face. "You must be diggin' mighty deep, ~~Bacon~~," Walcott said quietly, "to hire somethin' right out of the mail-order catalogue."

Enough of Walcott's words reached Middleton, across the yard, to bring a flush to his face. "Name's Joe Rand," Duffy said. "I knew him in Texas. What's on your mind?"

"I figured I'd get a better welcome than this," the old man said, frowning at the chill in Duffy's voice. "Seein' as how I saved your bacon."

"You did, and I appreciate it."

"We planted Ed Loren where he fell. That was good shootin', Rincon."

Middleton came up, brows lifted. "You killed Ed Loren?" he demanded.

Duffy nodded. "I'd have told you, but what was the use? It might sound like I was proud of killing him."

Middleton looked surprised. "You should have told me. It's

your duty to keep me informed—" Then he broke off under Duffy's hard stare, a warning shake of the head.

Walcott, observing this from the saddle, gave Duffy a long look. "When I was ramrod of a spread," the old man said, "no grub-line rider told me what I was s'posed to do. How come you let this fella talk up to you?"

"Rand is a special friend. What was it you wanted?"

"Mrs. Kell wants you to come to supper."

Duffy gave a harsh laugh. "And I suppose the invitation is also from her husband."

"So she says." The old man looked at Duffy earnestly. "Give Mrs. Kell a chance, Rincon. She figures if she can get you an' her husband to set down and talk you can work things out."

"Or maybe she hopes I'll take a gun," Duffy said, "and kill him and rid her of an unwanted husband."

"Now why'd you say a thing like that?"

"Because it's likely the truth."

"Don't judge the woman too harsh, Rincon," Walcott said. "You're a hard man to talk to."

"They haven't blown any bugles in honor of me coming to this bloody corner of Arizona."

"That they haven't. Maybe none of us like this place too much." He shifted his bony seat in the saddle. "Had a talk with Kyle myself today. He'll stay hitched long enough for you an' him to set down at the supper table an' talk. I got his word on that."

"Word?" Duffy scoffed.

"You can believe that much of what I told you anyhow."

Duffy was thoughtful a moment. In the distance clouds were torn by the spring breeze against the Ramparts. "I could be walking into a trap," Duffy said.

Walcott's lips curled. "I never before figured a Texas man was so miserly in the gut."

"This Texas man has stayed alive," Duffy said sharply, "by picking his own trail. Not letting somebody else pick it for him."

"Mrs. Kell told me how Loren 'bushed you an' how she talked him outa puttin' that second bullet in your head."

"I've thanked her for it," Duffy said.

"Thank her again tonight. You owe her that much."

"I'll see."

Walcott reined in his horse and said over his shoulder, "I'm headin' back to Mountain now. If you ain't scared," he went on with thin malice, "you can ride with me."

Duffy hesitated a moment, then said he'd go. He went into the house and Middleton worriedly trailed him.

"What if something happens to you?" the younger man said.

"You mean you're worried that you'll be left here all alone?"

Middleton looked angry for a moment, then turned the blistered palms of his hands up to make a gesture of resignation. "I'll play the game your way. It's the only chance I have. Maybe this is what I've needed all my life. I always looked up to my Uncle Howie. Something I never did to my own father. I wish Uncle Howie had taken me when I was a kid and brought me up right—"

"You keep talking like that," Duffy said, putting a hand on Middleton's shoulder, "and you and me will end up being friends yet. No matter what happens."

Middleton followed him to the door where Duffy got his brush jacket and shrugged into it. "I really am concerned about you, Duffy," Middleton said. It was the first time he had called him Duffy. It seemed to surprise Middleton a little. Then he gave Duffy a small smile.

"All right, Randy."

"Don't call me Randy. It reminds me of the kind of man I was in Chicago. Soft. Call me Rand, will you?"

"Sure. But when anybody else is around it's Joe Rand."

They shook hands.

"Take care of yourself," Middleton said.

"It's something I've been doing for thirty years. I won't stop now."

Duffy rode out with the old man, the silence thickening between them for five miles. When they crossed the Packer Road they came suddenly on Mike Casson, astride a big Morgan, which was probably the only animal in his string that would support his weight.

At Casson's side, looking like a monkey on a sawhorse, was Billy Rooley. He wore his bowler hat and pink shirt, stained

now with perspiration. There were three other men, hard-eyed, heavily armed, with Casson and Rooley.

Casson drew rein. "You signin' Rincon on at Mountain, Pap?" he asked the old man.

Walcott spat. "Rincon's his own man. Reckon you oughta know that by this time." He eyed the three men who had halted their horses a dozen yards behind Casson and Rooley. "You boys out pryin' somebody's beef from under the rocks?"

Casson showed no offense. He looked at Duffy. "Soon's they get around to it, Rincon, the folks in Packer will probably build you a monument for knockin' the dust out of Ed Loren. Loren give them hell a few times in that town. You're some sort of a hero."

"Nobody's a hero just for killing a man," Duffy said.

Walcott said, "How'd you know Loren got killed?"

"Carl Miller was in town at the Rimrock. He told it big."

"If you see Carl again," Walcott said, "you send him home. Tell him I said so."

So far neither Duffy nor Walcott had acknowledged the presence of Billy Rooley. His small pinched face turned on Duffy. "I heard what you said about me." His eyes were sullen. "Sayin' you'd like to push me back under the manure pile where I was born. I don't like that kind of talk!"

"You better watch out for this banty rooster," Casson said, his big scarred face smiling. "He can shake a derringer out of his sleeve mighty fast."

"Any time you want to shake out a derringer," Duffy told the little man, "I'll be ready."

Rooley glared. "I could cut you off at the bootheels."

"I saw you in Packer the other day. Who was the girl you had beside the hotel? A new recruit?"

"I buy and sell beef," Rooley said, and gave him an ugly look.

"He's an important man, Rincon," Casson said. "Before you quit this country you'll likely have use for him."

"I doubt that," Duffy said.

He and Walcott moved on. The old man said when they were out of earshot, "If you figure on dyin' real soon and you

got gold in your teeth, you better file it out. Because Casson will be around to steal it before your body's cold."

"He brags he's also a cow thief," Duffy said.

"He's the biggest in these parts."

"Not the biggest," Duffy said. "I hear Kyle Kell heads the pack."

Pap Walcott said curtly, "You're talkin' about a thing that ain't none of your business. I been on your side up to now. But don't butt in where you ain't wanted."

"I don't understand." They were entering the foothills now. "You act as if you don't like Casson because he's a thief. Yet you tolerate Kell."

"That's different. If Kell is stealin'—and I ain't sayin' he is—he's stealin' from Middleton. I got no use for a soft-headed rich man who'll sit back in Chicago and let other men risk their necks earnin' money for him."

"It's hardly a reason to condemn a man," Duffy said. "Plenty of big ranches in Texas are owned by Yankees. Nobody thinks anything about it."

"It ain't that. But I'll say this much for Kyle. Much as I sometimes hate his guts. He earned that Mountain Ranch. And Howie Middleton promised if he'd stick with him Kell would own Mountain."

"You're sure about this?"

"And Howie was goin' to leave the Rifle Creek place to his nephew. But Howie double-crossed Kyle. He left the whole caboodle to young Middleton. It was a foul thing to do. And I don't blame Kyle for bein' sore. Some things I don't hold with, but when Kyle takes Middleton's beef, I hold with that."

Duffy chewed this over in his mind until they had ridden the length of a canyon, climbed the west wall on a steep zig-zag trail. Duffy hipped around to study their back trail. There was no sign of movement on the long slope they had been steadily climbing for an hour. Ahead were a series of ridges and mesas.

Pap Walcott said, "Think somebody's on our trail?"

"I was thinking of that kid, Carl Miller. I suppose he'll hold it against me for killing Loren."

"Ed filled his head with a lot of nonsense about gun fight-

in'. Ed only done it to keep the kid on a tight rope. Once Carl rode clean to Packer in the damndest rainstorm you ever seen just to fetch Ed some whisky."

"I hope this Carl Miller's got sense enough to drift."

"So do I." Walcott looked grim. "Kyle swears the kid has gone. Says the kid was so busted up over Loren dyin' that he got his time. Said he was goin' to Nevada."

When they stopped to let their horses drink at a creek that foamed down through a trough in the rocks, Walcott said, "No matter what Mrs. Kell has done, I like her. Reckon if it wasn't for her sister showin' up she'd have gone with Loren weeks ago."

Duffy was thoughtful. He wondered how the woman would feel when they met face to face. For he was the man who had killed her lover. No matter what she claimed now, there must have been some emotion there for the man.

They rode on again. Duffy said suddenly, "Maybe Howie Middleton didn't leave Kell the Mountain Ranch, but he did specify in his will that Kell was to have a lifetime job."

Walcott looked at the big Texan riding beside him. "Kell's got a lifetime job all right. But it wasn't Howie likin' him. Howie an' Kyle done business together in Mexico." The old man was silent a moment, then said, "It's the kind of thing a man don't talk about much."

"Kell's got a hate on for Mexicans," Duffy said casually. And when Walcott made no reply, he went on, "I hear it goes clear back to the time he married one of them."

Walcott's gray head jerked up. "Where'd you hear that?"

Duffy said that Kell had mentioned it himself in Casson's Store.

Walcott suddenly looked older, grim, and a little saddened. "There was a gal all right," he said after they had ridden a quarter of a mile in silence. "But Kyle never married her. He promised plenty of times, though. Then one day she give him a son. And he wanted to marry her. But by that time it was too late."

"You mean she died giving birth to the boy?"

"It would've been better had it happened like that." Walcott shook his head. "Her folks found out how things was.

They come up from Chihuahua City—"Walcott slapped a hand on the dusty worn leg of his levis. And there must have been an old and ugly memory that touched his mind, for his face twisted in bitterness. "The girl's folks come after Kyle. There was about ten of 'em. We had a cow camp in the Sierra Madres then. Me an' Howie Middleton an' Kyle. Howie an' Kyle had gone to get the girl and the baby. I was with the crew and the herd. Well, Howie an' Kyle run into the girl's menfolks. There was trouble." The old man broke off.

"Go on, let's hear the rest of it."

"Why? You ain't interested."

"Sometimes it helps to understand a man if you know what makes him the way he is."

"Well, when Kyle an' Howie seen these Mexes comin' they run. They didn't know the gal was with 'em. There was some shootin'. The gal was killed. Either Kyle or Howie shot her. They never did know which one, 'cause they'd both been shootin'." Walcott sighed. "The Mexicans wanted to hang 'em both. Kyle an' Howie got away from that bunch. When they got back to camp, we all saddled up an' headed for the border. We left the herd. That Campo family rounded up a hundred men to take Kyle's trail. We rode fast, believe me. If they ever catch Kyle down there, they'll run the ground out from under him so fast he won't know what happened."

"Kell never found his son?"

"He went back there several times, a damn risky thing to do, seein' as how bad he was wanted. But he never did find the kid. It sure made a difference in him. He ain't never been the same. Whenever he sees a Mex now he thinks maybe it's one of the Campo family sendin' somebody to kill him."

"I hear when he found out my name was Rincon," Duffy said, "he got some ideas about me."

"Yeah, he figured you was one of 'em all right."

"And I suppose you feel the same way about Mexicans as Kell does?"

"I was born in Mexico, Rincon. Till I was fifteen the only Anglo I knowed was my pa. But if I ever went back they'd hang me quicker'n a man can draw breath. On account of I was workin' with Kyle."

"You're a funny one, Pap. You excuse everything Kell does just because years ago he wasn't man enough to marry the mother of his son."

"I don't excuse him for a damn thing. He puts up with me because no man wants it known that he killed a woman. Either him or Howie. And Howie's dead so it just leaves Kyle."

"Yet you told me all about it. How do you know I won't spread the story?"

"Don't make no difference, one way or another. I got me a feelin' the whole thing's about over with anyhow."

"Why do you stick with Kell?"

For a long moment Pap Walcott was silent. He broke off a twig from an oak they were passing. "I'm an old man, Rincon. I got me a place to sleep and enough to eat. That's more'n a lot of us old-timers has got."

And Duffy knew that this was the thing he himself had been fighting. To grow old in the saddle and have nothing of your own. No brand, no woman.

"If you think the game is about over," Duffy said, "why will it do any good to sit down and talk with Kell?"

"It's the last chance, Rincon. If he won't listen to sense now, there's nothin' left but a damn bloody war. Nobody wants that. But Kell's bullheaded enough to push things too far." The old man hipped around in the saddle. "If anything happens to me, Rincon, you tell that story about Kell. You tell it how he likely killed the mother of his own son. I hope the bastard is so shamed he don't stop runnin' till he comes to the Pacific Ocean."

"From what I've seen of Kell, I doubt if anything would shame him."

Chapter 13

FROM WHAT DUFFY COULD SEE of the frame buildings scattered across a wide shelf Mountain didn't seem to be in much better shape than Rifle Creek headquarters. Walcott took his horse and pointed at the house where a pale-haired woman stood, wiping her hands on an apron. "Mrs. Kell is waitin' to bid you welcome," the old man said. "Good luck."

Feeling awkward under the circumstances of their last meeting when she had put herself on the block for five hundred dollars, he advanced to meet her. She wore the same cheap dress.

Coming out of the house now, looking slicked up a little, was Kell. His beard was trimmed and he wore a clean shirt. Kell stood beside his wife, and held out his hand.

"Reckon I got no right to ask your friendship, but—"

Duffy took the hard hand in his own. Their eyes met, and Duffy thought: "You don't want friendship any more than Loren wanted it."

But he let Kell and the woman lead him into the house where he smelled the good odors of cooking. And he knew again that he had missed much in his life of men and cattle and horses.

Sitting in hide-bottomed chairs, Duffy and Kell lifted glasses and drank whisky to each other's health.

Mrs. Kell, busy at the stove, was soon joined by a dark-haired girl. Suella, her arm about the girl's waist, introduced her to Duffy.

Duffy got up, and Kell said, "You don't have to stand to a woman. Set down, Rincon."

Suella gave her husband an angry glance. Duffy and Merry were staring at each other. Again he saw dislike in her eyes as he had that day in Packer when he had come upon her talking with Billy Rooley.

"I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, ma'am," he said.

Merry gave a brief nod and went to join her sister at the stove. Duffy found himself not listening to Kell's ramblings about the cattle business. Kell was drinking steadily from the whisky bottle in his lap, not bothering to refill Duffy's glass. Duffy was watching Merry. She wore a gray dress that fit snugly at bosom and waist.

When Duffy faced around in his chair, he saw Kell regarding him sullenly. And Duffy realized the man resented the fact that he had been watching the girl at the stove. Jealous, Duffy thought.

During the meal of boiled beef and vegetables, Kell drank, hardly touching his food. The conversation grew strained. And the friendly manner Mrs. Kell had assumed upon Duffy's arrival was gradually replaced by worry. He caught her looking at him, an appeal for help in her eyes. What the hell can I do? he asked himself angrily. Was he supposed to dedicate his life in this corner of Arizona to settling Middleton's range problems and at the same time offer a solution to Suella Kell's faltering marriage?

"You comin' here an' finishin' Loren," Kell said, "was good work. Nobody cared nothin' about Loren." He flashed a glance at his pale wife. "Except maybe my wife here." He gave Duffy a tight drunken smile.

"Let's not talk about it, Kyle," Suella said stiffly.

"Nobody give much of a damn about Ed," Kell said, looking at Duffy. "That kid, Carl Miller, thought he was big though." He cocked a brow. "You seen the kid around, Rincon?"

"No."

Kell lifted the bottle for another drink, staring at Duffy. Suella said, "Please, Kyle, you promised." Her voice faltered as he glared at her.

Merry Dunn got up and started to clear away the dishes. When she came to take Duffy's plate he felt her arm brush against his. The contact surprised him, the softness, the warmth. Had he been so long without the touch of a woman that he reacted like a schoolboy when one was near? He fol-

lowed her with his eyes as she crossed the dirt floor and put the dirty dishes into a pan.

Kell said, "Ain't you ever seen a purty gal before?"

Merry turned, flushing. Suella gave her husband a faint warning shake of the head. His eyes were getting bloodshot.

Suella sat down at the table when it was cleared. "Mr. Rincon," she said, her hands clasped on the table edge, "there is enough room in this country for two men like you and my husband. There's ten miles or more of range separating the two ranches. So you can both do the jobs Middleton hired you for. Without bloodshed."

Duffy felt sorry for the woman. She was trying so hard and Kell was paying no attention. "Unfortunately," Duffy said, "there has already been bloodshed, Mrs. Kell."

But she kept trying, you had to give her credit for that. "If you and my husband stay away from each other—if you stay on Rifle Creek and he stays on Mountain there should be no trouble." She turned on her husband imploringly. "Kyle will do his part. Won't you, Kyle?"

"Maybe." Kell's voice was mocking. He finished the whisky. Kell leaned forward. "You're a cowman, Rincon. What would ten miles of grass added to Middleton's two ranches mean? It means a man could control this corner of the territory."

"What makes you think Ellenbert would lease or sell? Or that Middleton would sell his ranches?" Duffy asked, seeking to draw him out.

"Sell?" Kell roared with laughter then slapped Duffy on the knee. "Middleton will be outa business in a year. You an' me, Rincon, could run the whole place."

And Duffy thought, How long would it be—providing I went along with you—before I got a bullet in the back?

"I won't double cross a man," Duffy said. "I work for Middleton." So this was Kell's game. Get him up here and suggest they both work against Middleton. And then when the young man from Chicago was out of the picture, Duffy Rincon one day would be listed as deceased from something like the black pneumonia.

Suella said, "Kyle, let's talk about getting along. Not about driving Middleton out—"

"Shut up," Kell said. Suella flushed and Merry looked as if she might say something. The girl was angry, Duffy could tell that.

"This talk about gettin' along," Kell told his wife. "If Rincon's too stupid to jump at a chance to get rich, it's his fault. It ain't mine."

One look at Suella told Duffy that she knew he had wasted his time coming here.

Kell got unsteadily to his feet. "It was on account of Merry that I promised Suella I'd talk to you." He moved suddenly behind Merry at the stove, drawing her in front of him, holding her rigid with both hands on her shoulders. Duffy half got out of his chair as he saw the girl cringe at Kell's touch. Suella sat rigid, an unvoiced protest on her lips.

"Suella said that for Merry's sake," Kell went on, "I oughta get a rope on my temper. Suella says Merry is gettin' sick on account of all this fightin'." Kell glared over the top of the frightened girl's dark head. "What do you think, Rincon?"

Duffy said nothing. Was Kell really drunk, or was he pretending? Hoping his guest would think him incapable of acting in a crisis. Kell was a hard man to fathom.

Kell's lips twisted. "I'm the one that's sick!"

Suella was on her feet, crying, "Kyle, don't make things worse."

And Merry tried to twist free of Kell, but he held her firmly.

Duffy got up, knowing he would have to interfere, regretting he had let old Walcott talk him into riding all the way up here. Walcott might have known you couldn't deal with a man like Kell.

"With money you can buy any damn thing you want, Rincon," Kell said. "You better remember that."

Duffy took a step forward, then halted. He would not allow himself to fall into this trap; one set either by Kell or his wife. Kell hoping to trick him into some stupid act by pretending drunkenness. Perhaps the wife luring him here in the hopes a situation would develop that would result in her husband's death at the hands of Duffy Rincon.

"Thanks for the supper, Mrs. Kell." Duffy turned to Merry Dunn, and the fear in her dark eyes made him realize that

trap or not he couldn't allow the girl to be manhandled this way. "If you'll show me to the door, ma'am—"

"Gladly," she said, and tried to get away, but Kell would not let her go.

"You know what I'm goin' to do, Rincon?" Kell shouted.

"I don't care very much what you do!"

"I'm goin' to give my wife a thousand dollars. She can go down to Prescott and get a *dee-vorce*."

Suella looked shocked, then recovered. "That's the best news I've heard in ages, Kyle. Thanks."

Kell, lurching a little behind Merry, grinned. "An' when Suella gets her *dee-vorce* I'm goin' to marry this little gal right here." With one hand Kell reached around and stroked Merry's cheek. The girl seemed frozen for a moment, then she whirled out of his grasp. She slapped him across his bearded face.

"Haven't you hurt Suella enough!" she cried. "Without saying such a thing?"

Kell was rubbing his chin where Merry's hand had struck him. "I like that," he grinned as his wife stared at him with loathing and a burgeoning terror. "Merry's got more fire than a she-cat with cubs!" Kell finished.

Suella said, "Do you have to show your rotten self in front of a guest?" Her voice shook with fury.

"Rotten?" Kell's eyes were ugly. "That's a funny word comin' from you. I oughta kill you!"

As Kell lunged for his wife, Duffy rammed the man in the side with the tip of a shoulder. The blow knocked Kell crashing against the wall.

"You talk about killing a woman!" Duffy cried. "Isn't once in one lifetime enough?"

Dazed, Kell pushed himself away from the wall. "Who told you that?" he demanded, his eyes thin and a little wild.

"You can't keep a story like that quiet."

"Pap Walcott's the only one that knows." Kell started for the door, head down, arms swinging. "I'll fix that old hellion—"

Duffy caught a handful of shirt sleeve that ripped loose in his fingers. Kell staggered against a chair, fell across it, crushing it to the floor. He rolled aside, trying to get his gun loose.

Suella screamed. Merry stood rigid, terrified. Duffy stepped in, launching a kick aimed at Kell's right arm. The swinging boot toe missed its mark and caught Kell flush on the chin. Kell's head snapped back to crash against the dirt floor. He went limp, mouth open. At first Duffy thought he had broken the man's neck. Stooping, he felt for a pulse. It was strong. He straightened up and turned to Suella. And he really felt sorry for her. It was a pity the thing couldn't have ended with a broken neck.

Duffy spread his hands. "I wish I could help you, but—"

She did not look at him. She was staring at Kell lying crumpled, an unconscious bear. "He's had it coming."

"Will it help," Duffy said, "if I ride you to town?"

"You don't know him—" Suella said, and Merry, pressing a hand over her mouth, fled into the back part of the house.

"You owe it to your sister to get away," Duffy said.

"Don't worry, I'm going to send Merry away." Suella's eyes flashed. "I offered you a bargain. You refused me."

"I had no choice."

She looked down at her husband again. "Kyle promised me that tonight he would settle his differences with you. And I believed him. He's many things. He's also a liar."

Duffy debated his next statement, then decided he was already involved in the lives of these people. Further involvement could not be helped. "You'd better watch how your sister gets away from here." He told her about seeing the girl and Billy Rooley talking together.

"Ed Loren also mentioned this man. Who is Rooley anyway?"

"You don't know?" When she shook her head, Duffy thought of explaining. But at that moment Kell began to snort and stir on the floor. He didn't want to be here when the man came to. Already he'd had enough trouble. Kell might turn the crew on him in payment for that kick on the jaw. This time Pap Walcott might be powerless to stop Kell. It was unfortunate, Duffy reflected, that he had let it slip about the killing of the girl in Mexico. Well, it couldn't be helped.

"What will happen to you when your husband comes to?" Duffy asked the woman.

She gave him a bitter smile. "I can handle him. There is one way a woman can always handle a man like Kell."

"Your husband talked about buying a divorce for a thousand dollars. That's a lot of money. Can't you get hold of it?"

"He's been stealing Skull beef and selling it. But I suppose you knew that. I wish to God I knew where he keeps the money. If I did, I wouldn't be here an hour."

"If you need help," Duffy said, "send word by Walcott."

He found his horse tied behind the house. As he tightened the cinch, a step brought him swinging around. He saw Merry Dunn hurrying toward him from the shadows. "Please don't say anything to Suella about me talking with Billy Rooley."

"Why?"

"I want to get away from here, Mr. Rincon. I'm afraid Suella will worry and try to stop me if I get away by myself. In my own way."

He picked up the reins, wondering if he should say that he had already mentioned Rooley to her sister. It was embarrassing to him to explain about Rooley. Certainly the girl knew— But he tried, "You know the business Rooley is in?"

In the growing twilight her dark eyes widened with surprise. "Business? Why, of course I know his business."

He gave a puzzled shake of his head. "And you still like his sort of—work?"

"What's the matter with clerking in a Tucson store?" she said. "I came up on the same stage with Mr. Rooley. We got acquainted. He said if I ever needed a job to look him up. And I did."

He studied her pretty face. And in him was the dark thrust of anger that would make him want to kill a man. "A clerking job in Tucson," he said through his teeth.

She seemed surprised at the tone of his voice. "Just what else did you think it was?"

"You ought to talk it over with your sister."

"I want to leave here—on my own. All my life I've been dependent on Suella. But I'm going." Her chin trembled. "I can't wait another day."

He took a deep breath, wondering why there was so much

ugliness in the world. "I already told your sister. But I knew nothing of the clerking job. Promise me one thing?"

"Just why should I promise you anything?"

"I know you dislike me."

"You're a killer, Mr. Rincon."

"Yes, I shot Ed Loren."

"I hated Loren. But he was a human being and he's dead. And—and you're the one responsible for his dying."

"I suppose you'd be happier if he'd have succeeded, and I was the one who failed."

Their eyes held for a long moment, then her gaze slipped away. "You wanted me to make you a promise," she said. "What is it?"

He put a hand on her shoulder, feeling through the thin fabric of her shirt the warmth of flesh. And through him raced the old longing. A longing not for a woman in some smoky room with the lamp turned low. Not the bright-eyed kind with the easy laughter. The kind a man met along the trail. He wanted the kind a man could build a life on. Realization touched him like a cold hand. Those dreams were for the young. He was thirty years old. It would take the rest of his life, if he was lucky, just to keep himself in the saddle. Let alone sharing that life with a woman.

He stepped back, his voice gruff. "Promise me you won't leave here until Rooley sends for you."

"I don't know why I should—" She bit her lip. "I'll do my best to keep that promise."

"I told your sister if she needs help to get word to me. The same goes for you."

For a moment her eyes were softer as she looked up at him. Then she said, "I won't need your help, Mr. Rincon. I can look out for myself." She turned on her heel and entered the house.

Duffy rode out slowly, and men in front of the bunkhouse looked him over. None of them said anything. From behind the cookshack could be heard the thunk-thunk-thunk of an ax cutting evening wood for the stove.

Chapter 14

IT WAS NEARLY MIDNIGHT when Duffy reached Casson's Store. Dismounting, he peered in and saw three men at the bar. They turned to look him over as, spurs clanking, he walked in and ordered a drink from Casson. He paid for a drink and when the three men waved their good nights to Casson, gave Duffy another look and went out, Casson said, "Those three boys could be workin' for you if you and me partner up."

Duffy gave him a hard smile. He asked if Rooley was around and Casson, eyes wary, said he was. "Get him in here," Duffy said. "I want to buy him a drink."

He refilled his glass, laid down another coin. The whisky drained some of the tiredness from him. It had been a long and fruitless ride to Mountain.

Casson had been studying him coldly. "How come you want to belly up to the bar with Rooley? I thought you didn't like him."

Duffy shrugged. "If I come in with you, we might have to use him. You said he knew where to sell beef."

"Yeah." Casson went to the rear of the store and presently returned with Rooley, whose small jaws worked on a piece of gristle. There was grease on his chin. He took a napkin from around his neck, dabbed at his chin. His narrow face was tight with suspicion. Duffy filled a glass for him, raised his own.

"You're a smart businessman, Rooley," Duffy said.

Frowning, Rooley lifted his glass. "You think so?"

"Yeah. I saw you in town the other day. That was a good-looker you were talking to." When Rooley continued to stare, narrow-eyed, up at him, Duffy said, "Know who the girl is?"

Rooley took his second drink, wiped his mouth on a shirt sleeve. "Sure, I know who she is."

"Sort of a joke on Mrs. Kell, isn't it?" Duffy said, and winked. "Seeing as how that's her sister you're dealing with."

From a corner of his eye Duffy saw Rooley give Casson a look of perplexity. Casson shrugged, as if unable to understand where this was leading.

Duffy leaned across the bar. "You furnish the men for our enterprise, right?" And when Casson nodded, Duffy turned to peer down at Rooley. "And you furnish the women."

"Rooley deals in cows," Casson said, scowling. "I told you that."

"But he's got a side line. Or maybe it's the beef that's the side line. What do you think about it, Casson?"

Casson said, "Nothing wrong in making a little extra money."

"Not a thing wrong." Duffy grinned down at Rooley. The little man wore no bowler hat tonight. His brown hair was center-parted, spread sparingly over his small skull.

Duffy seemed to be getting a little drunk, and he apparently was enjoying the discussion. "Just how do you get a gal like Merry Dunn to go along with you?"

Rooley hesitated, as if debating the advisability of revealing professional secrets. Then he said, "You find a gal that wants to leave home. Or a wife that's tired of havin' the bit in her teeth."

"It's easy when you find a girl as scared as Merry Dunn, huh?" Duffy smiled to show Rooley that everything was all right.

"She's scared all right," Rooley admitted, the whisky and Duffy's easy manner relaxing his guard. "She thinks Kell is the biggest no-good that ever come over the mountain."

"Well, doesn't she know what she's in for?"

"She figures she's goin' to clerk in a store in Tucson." Rooley giggled and accepted the glass Duffy refilled for him.

"When'll she find out different?"

"Oh, any time between here and Tucson," Rooley said, pride of accomplishment in his voice. "Most of 'em know what they're in for at the start. But a gal like this— Well,

you break 'em like you do a horse. Takes a little time. But once they're in, they're in."

"I recollect hearing once about a girl that shot herself," Duffy said. "Although she was no longer a girl."

"Oh, hell, Rincon," Rooley said, "you been readin' books. Gals get used to it real quick."

"Sure, and this one did, too. Got used to it." Duffy leaned against the bar, his eyes no longer friendly. "This woman was named Gypsy. She got old real fast, as those kind do. And when she got gray in the head, they laughed at her, and the so-called good women of the town practically spit on her. That was after this Gypsy tried to live down what she'd been. But they wouldn't let her. And they shamed a kid that used to hang around her. Not hang around like you would think, Rooley. Not in bed. But reading her books and her listening to him recite poetry. A kid about the age of this Carl Miller that was in here the other day buying whisky for Ed Loren."

"What's this Gypsy woman to you?" Casson said thinly.

"She raised me, boys. She had a halo a mile wide. If it hadn't been for her, I'd probably been dead years back. Buried somewhere along the river. Running from a posse. An empty-headed kid who would never have been able to write his own name. Who wouldn't be able to read it if he found it written down someplace."

Rooley, his face going white, stepped back. He made a movement with his right hand but Duffy got him by the wrist. He twisted the arm so hard a derringer clattered out on the dirty floor.

"I ought to cut your skinny throat, you little bastard!" Duffy cried.

With his left hand he caught Billy Rooley by the throat, lifted him high, and pinned him against the store wall. Then with his right hand he slapped Rooley soundly across the face. Back and forth the hand whipped until Rooley's nose gave way and the blood streamed across broken lips and the heels of the dainty boots beat desperately against the wall.

Then in the moment it had taken to do this, Duffy re-

leased his hold. Rooley fell to the floor with a squall of pain. A big shadow crossed a corner of Duffy's vision. He spun. Casson was coming for him around the end of the bar. Casson's scarred face was livid.

"Rooley's my friend!" Casson cried. "You manhandled him. Now I'll give you the same!"

Casson let go with a mighty fist that Duffy managed to avoid. As Casson lunged in again, trying to catch him in a murderous embrace, Duffy brought down the barrel of his gun across the crown of Casson's head. He went to his knees, blood streaming across his face.

Backing to the door, Duffy cocked his gun. In the doorway at the bottom of the stairs he caught sight of Soccorro, the red paper rose in her dark hair. She was bent over, peering into the room. And her white teeth flashed in a smile when she saw Rooley squirming on the floor, screaming like a hysterical woman.

Duffy backed to the door, with Casson yelling through blood that spilled from a split scalp: "You're a dead man, Rincon!"

As Duffy reined away from the hitch rail he saw Casson staggering for the bar and the shelf where he kept his sawed-off shotgun. Two well-placed shots drove Casson back. Another shot knocked out the lamp. Just before the store was plunged in darkness he caught sight of Billy Rooley's ruined face. It was one of the few pleasant things he'd seen since coming to this hellish country.

Chapter 15

THERE WAS MUCH SPECULATION that morning at Mountain Ranch. In the first place, aside from the disappearance of the kid Carl Miller, Charlie Penn, the lank, long-jawed rider Kell had named as segundo, was also missing. The last anybody had seen of Penn was when he rode out, Kell's cased Union-issue field glasses around his neck.

Penn hadn't come back. This morning Kell looked worried. He was in a foul mood. Those close enough to get a good look at him in the cookshack saw that his jaw was swollen.

Another item that had caused speculation happened before dawn. One of the older riders, whose kidneys had taken twenty years of beating in the saddle, had gone outside in the chill darkness. He had seen Merry Dunn ride out. Because a man was safer here if he noticed nothing and kept his mouth shut, the rider did not reveal to Kell what he had seen. But in the morning he passed the news around discreetly.

The next thing that caused gossip and a shock of indignation to some of the crew at least was the way Suella Kell looked. Suella had emptied a dishpan of water out the back door just as two of the hands passed on their way to the cookshack. She saw them and tried to hide with her hand the wide purple bruise that discolored the right side of her face.

The men paused, embarrassed. She told them with a shaky laugh that during the night she had tripped over a chair and hit her face on the table. The men said that sure was too bad. When she went back into the house, they hurried to spread the word.

There was also this evidence of battery on Kyle Kell this

morning. He ate in the cookshack instead of taking his breakfast in the house. The men were apprehensive because of his ugly mood. They kept glancing at the swelling along his bearded jaw. Some of them privately hoped Suella had hit him with a stove lid. They didn't know that the swinging toe of Duffy Rincon's boot had nearly broken Kell's jaw.

This morning they ate fried beef, frijoles, and pan bread. Kell looked around the crowded table. No one glanced up from his plate.

Pap Walcott, at the stove, glared across the room at Kell. "Ain't Charlie Penn come back yet?" Kell demanded of the old man.

Pap Walcott wiped his sweating face on a corner of the flour-sack apron. "He rode out yesterday. With your field glasses."

"Yeah, I know."

"If Charlie's got any sense," Walcott said, "he's halfway to Prescott by now. No man with half an ounce of morals can stomach this place for long."

Kell's small eyes were wicked. The men expected an explosion. "Got somethin' on your mind, Pap?"

"I saw Mrs. Kell's face," Walcott said, and every man in the room got ready to break for the door.

"She hit her head on the table," Kell said.

"So she told me." Walcott spat in the woodbox.

Kell took his men deep in the Ramparts that day. In a mile-long canyon some eight hundred head of Skull beef had been bunched. Kell drew Pap Walcott aside. "If this damn country blows up, we'll push these cows to Mexico."

Pap gave him a cold look. "You set foot over that line and you're a dead man. And you know it."

"I'm goin' to make one last try at findin' my boy."

Walcott walked away and left him standing alone.

Merry Dunn couldn't help but feel that everything would be better if she got away from Mountain. She had overheard the terrible argument between Kyle and her sister after Rincon left. She knew that Kyle had hit her sister.

She couldn't understand why Suella didn't stand up for herself. She even offered to give Suella the big revolver she now carried in the waistband of her leather riding skirt. But Suella wouldn't take it.

The weapon was heavy, cold against her flesh. She wondered, if it came to a showdown, whether she had the nerve to use the gun against a man.

Well, it was past all that now. She had left her clothes at the ranch. Because, if she had taken them, Suella would worry and probably send some of the men after her.

She rode all the way to Packer, hunting for Billy Rooley. In town they said that he was probably at Casson's Store. So she rode there.

As she dismounted in front of the place, she hesitated. Through the window she could see a bar. After all, a woman wasn't supposed to go into a saloon. And yet this was more of a store than a saloon, she told herself. Besides, she was past the point where she could worry about propriety.

Bravely she entered. A big man wearing a dirty bandage on his head gave her a surly scowl. There was no one else in the place. The shelves were dirty, the stock depleted. She had the feeling that more whisky than supplies was sold here.

"I'm looking for Mr. Rooley," she said.

Casson looked her over, recognized her, and shouted: "Billy!"

Rooley limped from the back of the store. Merry gasped. Had it not been for his slight build and his dainty feet, she would hardly have recognized him. His face was misshapen. His nose had been pushed to one side, the lips lacerated. Sight of him almost turned her stomach.

"What has happened, Mr. Rooley!" she cried.

He clung with one hand to the edge of the bar, as if he needed the support to keep his legs from collapsing. "Your friend Rincon done this to me," he said.

"Rincon?" she gasped. Then, studying Rooley's swollen eyes and the rest of the wreckage of the small face, she added indignantly, "Duffy Rincon is no friend of mine."

He licked his broken lips. "What do you want?"

"I need that job in Tucson—the one you told me about.

I can leave with you any time. Or perhaps you'd advance me the stage fare. And give me a letter to your friend in the Tucson store—"

Rooley said, "I can't leave here yet. I got some business to finish." He looked at Casson significantly.

Casson said, "We could put the girl up here a few days." And he leaned close and whispered something, and both men laughed.

Merry thought sure she caught the name of her brother-in-law. "I couldn't stay here. I've been counting the days. I'm sure this is the day the stage leaves Packer. And so I thought, Mr. Rooley—"

"Yeah, but we'll have to wait for the next one." He looked at her shirt, the riding skirt and boots. And the gun stuck in the waistband of the leather skirt. "You look like you can ride. We'll go by hossback to Prescott. We'll get a stage there."

"I don't know, Mr. Rooley. That would mean camping out with you—"

"You come here for a job, didn't you?" Rooley squinted out of his swollen eyes. A faint smile disturbed his ruined mouth. "Besides, me and Casson have got a joke cooked up for Kyle Kell. You hate him as much as we do."

"Yes, but—"

Rooley winked at Casson. "Got a fancy drink you can fix for the lady? Something that'll take the rust outa her joints. She's had a long ride."

Casson gave him a significant nod, reached for a small pink bottle he took from behind some other bottles on the back bar.

"No drink," Merry said, holding up a tanned hand. "Thank you just the same."

"This'll make you forget all your troubles," Casson said.

"I'm capable of facing up to my troubles."

Billy Rooley, still clinging to the bar lip, gave her a sour look. "When you get to Tucson, you'll learn to drink, you'll learn a lot of other things—"

"Wait a minute, Billy," Casson warned, and put the pink bottle away. "Don't spoil everything." He turned to the girl,

who stood uncertainly in the center of the dusty, cobwebbed store. "Billy's in a bad mood. He's hurt somethin' terrible by that beating Rincon give him. A fella big as Rincon beatin' up a fella Billy's size! You'll have to excuse Billy's sharp tongue today."

"Yes, I can understand," Merry said. She tried to remember last night when she had stood in the yard with Rincon. And for a moment—just for one fleeting moment—she had felt a growing weakness in her knees as he looked at her. It was the first time she had experienced such a feeling. Undoubtedly it was due to her overwrought nerves and living around Kyle and Suella, who were fighting all the time. "Rincon could, at least fight someone his own size," she said.

"Now you just keep outa sight here until Rooley's ready to leave for Tucson. We got a nice room upstairs." Casson turned and bellowed: "Soccorro!"

Merry saw a Mexican girl come to the foot of a stairway and peer into the store. When the girl looked at Rooley, her eyes seemed amused. Then she looked at Merry Dunn questioningly. A little defensively.

Casson said, "Show her a room, Soccorro." Then he said, "You tell her, Rooley."

And Rooley relayed the order in Spanish.

Frowning, Soccorro led Merry upstairs. The room was small, furnished with a cot and a chest of drawers. There was a lamp with a cracked chimney on a shelf. Merry sank to the cot. She was dead tired from the long ride down out of the mountains.

"You rest," Soccorro said in Spanish, and went out and closed the door.

Although she fought sleep, at last her eyes closed.



Chapter 16

DESPITE MANY HOURS in the saddle and all that had happened the evening and night before, Duffy was up at daybreak. Middleton gave Duffy a worried look when he saw spots of blood on the sleeve of his shirt. Duffy told him tiredly how he had backhanded Rooley and the reason behind it. And how he had laid a gun barrel across the top of Casson's head.

"One thing for sure," Middleton said gravely, "you've made a bad enemy in Casson."

"At least we know where we stand with him now," Duffy said. "We're not on his side of the creek, as he would put it."

Middleton wanted to know how things had gone at Mountain. He gave Middleton the details. "Kell is going to love me after that kick in the face. As the Mexicans would say, it's the same as kicking *el tigre*." Duffy knew this was true, for Kell was every bit as dangerous as a big cat.

Middleton was no hand as a cook, so Duffy, tired as he was, took over. When the meal was finished, Duffy said, "Did you know your uncle was supposed to leave Mountain to Kell?"

Middleton seemed surprised. "No, I never heard that."

"Pap Walcott told me. Maybe he knows what he's talking about. If he does, it's one reason Kell's got it in for you."

"He's at least got a job as long as he lives."

"It looks like I'm to be the executioner."

Middleton flushed, picked at a blister on the palm of his hand. "I didn't intend it to be that way," he protested.

"You figured I'd come here, get in a fight with Kell and finish him for you."

"I don't want blood on my hands."

"It won't be on your hands." Duffy felt his tiredness turn-

ing to anger. "It'll be on my hands. I'm also wondering if my name didn't have something to do with your choosing me over a lot of other good ramrods."

"What do you mean?"

"My name's Rincon. A Mexican name. Maybe you knew Kell hates Mexicans because of something that happened years back in Mexico. And you thought we'd tangle sooner than we would under ordinary circumstances."

"I thought yesterday we were beginning to be friends," Middleton said. He shook his head. "Besides, why so squeamish about Kell? He's no good."

"You know it's a fifty-fifty chance Kell will come out on top."

"I hired you for your ability, Duffy," Middleton said seriously. "You have a good reputation."

"Bah. What is reputation where there's brush to hide behind? If they get you in the back, your reputation doesn't stand for much. And if I die, all you have to do is hunt around for someone to take my place. And one day you'll run across a man who can finally get Kell out of your way."

Middleton looked bitter. "You don't think much of me."

"I'm too weary to think much of anything."

From the increasing light Duffy could see that it would be a wet, gray day. Already he could hear the faint drumming of rain on the roof. This could be a good land, he thought, as he finished his coffee. Plenty of grass. Enough rainfall. Or at least there was this year.

"They've had dry years," Middleton said, when Duffy voiced his thoughts.

"There's dry years any place a man raises beef." Duffy, sitting on a keg, leaned back against the wall, a tin cup of coffee cradled in a big hand. He thought of the long ride he would have to make to Prescott to get a crew. He gazed around the big room, seeing the cobwebs and the decay. Something could be made of this place despite its deficiencies. But it would need a woman's touch.

Duffy tore his thoughts away from the dark-haired Merry Dunn. "I admire you for one thing," Duffy told Middleton.

"You didn't hide back in Chicago. At least you came out to see how things were with your own eyes."

"A man has to make a stand someplace," Middleton said. "I've never made mine. I'm twenty-five years old. It's the first time in my life I've ever done anything. My father wouldn't even let me fight in the war. He bought me out of the army."

Duffy got up and stretched, the dreams flooding in again with the weariness. A man could dream and think of a soft-eyed girl, thinking of her waiting in a place like this. With the good smells of evening cooking when a man rode in after a day in the saddle. There would be curtains at the windows, and some growing thing, green and bright, near the door.

He heard one of the horses whinny. Alerted, he glanced through the window they had stuffed with gunnysack in the broken corner to keep out the weather. He could see their two horses cutting up in the corral, running, their heads high. Something in the cottonwoods that grew thickly beyond the barn had disturbed them. They kept looking that way.

Middleton's face whitened. "What is it?"

"I don't know." Duffy snatched up his rifle. Levering in a shell, he stepped out on the sagging porch that fronted the house and scanned the yard. The rain had turned to a drizzle that came through breaks in the overhang to plaster his dark red hair to his skull and run coldly down the back of his neck. In the distance a ribbon of lightning flashed crookedly above the Ramparts.

A man living with danger develops a sense for it. And Duffy, the rifle steady in his hands, caught a glimpse of color that was foreign to the surroundings. In the cottonwoods he could see a wedge of blue. He jerked up his rifle and waited. The wedge of blue was a little to the left of the barn, deep in the trees. Now the spot of blue seemed to move slightly.

The melancholy that had possessed him in the house was driven sharply from his consciousness by a sense of danger.

Middleton, who had slipped out of the house by a rear door, now came suddenly to the yard. He also carried a rifle. Although Duffy was glad to see the man showing some nerve,

still he waved him back. Middleton did not move. He kept peering off into the cottonwoods, following the direction of Duffy's gaze. Duffy moved down the rotted steps of the veranda and instantly a shot hammered from the cottonwoods.

The bullet passed with its noisy whisper an inch above his head and crashed into the wall at his back. With his boot-heels anchored in the mud he sighted swiftly on the spot of blue. He fired, and instantly there was a cry of pain.

"Keep me covered!" Duffy shouted at Middleton.

Bent over, he began a zigzag approach to the woods, running lightly for so large a man. As he ran he worked the loading lever. Beyond a deadfall he found a man curled up face down on the ground. The spot of blue Duffy had seen through the trees was a patched shirt faded from many washings. A rifle lay in the mud. Duffy kicked it aside. He drew the belt gun from the wounded man's holster and studied it a moment. There were roses carved in the ivory grips.

Feeling sick, he shoved the gun in his belt. The sickness was mixed with anger because he had nearly lost his life. Now he saw that the front of the shirt had changed from blue to an ugly rust color that he recognized all too well.

He straightened up, searching the cottonwoods with his eyes. But there seemed to be no one else around. Yet in the distance he heard the sudden hammer of hoofbeats fading. He ran through the cottonwoods and saw a horseman riding down a long slope a quarter of a mile away. In a moment the rider had disappeared around a shoulder of hill. For a moment Duffy considered going after him. But he knew by the time he got saddled up the man would be long gone. Besides, there were more important matters at hand.

He tramped back through the cottonwoods, past a tethered black horse. The body on the ground stirred. "You—you shot me, Rincon."

"You deserved it, you dirty little bushwhacker."

Duffy tried to put venom in his voice but it didn't quite come off. He knelt down. The kid clenched his teeth against

the rising tide of pain. "Loren was the only friend I had. You killed him."

"And so you even it up by trying to kill me."

The kid closed his eyes. "Go ahead and finish it."

Duffy said, "I'm not going to kill you." He felt the sickness deepening in him. That one screaming rifle shot of his brought back the war years. Remembering the others he had seen like this. It was the kids that got you, not the hard-bitten older ones who could curse your dirty gray uniform and your bearded face and your empty gut. Curse you and then die.

Middleton came up, his face white. "That was close, Duffy. I saw the hair stir on your scalp."

Duffy stared down at the kid; mud in the sun-bleached hair. There was no beard on Carl Miller's face, no lines at eyes or mouth. A face maybe that had never even felt the lips of a girl.

"Who was with you, kid?"

"Nobody. I—I'm alone."

"There was somebody on yonder hill. They rode for it when you went down."

"I tell you I come alone."

Duffy was sitting on his heels. "That was a fool play, kid. You had a poor teacher in Ed Loren."

A tear lay on a pale cheek then moved swiftly across a corner of the trembling mouth. "I figured you was alone. It was seein' the other fella there"—he nodded at Middleton—"that throwed me off."

"How much was Kell going to pay you for this job?"

The kid was silent a moment. "Nobody had to pay me. I—I liked Ed Loren."

"He's a dead friend," Duffy reminded. He had been examining the wound. The bullet had entered the chest, then probably been deflected by a rib and come out the side. There was only one consolation, slight as it might be. There was no bullet to cut out.

"You got any folks, kid?"

"I got nobody."

Duffy looked at the tragic entrance the bullet had made

in the chest of Carl Miller. It was what they called in the war a prayin' wound. There was little anybody could do. Some of them got well, most of them died. Some claimed if you prayed long and hard and fast and long and loud you could survive. The good Lord willing.

"You know how to pray, kid?"

"No."

"Ask God to forgive you for trying to murder a man. Ask Him to help you get well."

"I—I don't know how."

"Ask Him, damn it! Ask Him!"

He hated to move the kid, but he couldn't leave him out here. In the house he placed Miller on his own bedroll in a dry corner of the house. He tore up his only white shirt for a bandage. He boiled fresh coffee and spiked it with whisky he had brought from town with the supplies. The kid drank some of it, then lay back on the blankets, his eyes closed, as if this would help ward off the growing pain.

"How much did Kell pay you, kid?" Duffy demanded.

"Nobody paid me. I—I come myself."

"Why didn't you make your play before this?"

"I went to Packer. To drink a little nerve."

"A kid like you," Duffy said through his teeth. "You learned good. You learned real good from Loren."

"Loren was my friend. He was good to me."

"So you been telling me." Duffy was sitting on one of the kegs, peering down at the white face. "Kid, I knew a fella once in Texas. He liked every living thing. Said it was a crime to kill anything. He said it upset Nature's balance or something. He'd let rattlesnakes have the run of the place. But everybody warned him. There was one big rattler in particular. He said this rattler was real good because it kept the ranch free of mice. Maybe it did. And it was a fine idea. But one night he went out to the barn and didn't look where he was walking. We found him a week later. He didn't die easy."

"Loren wasn't no snake," the kid protested.

"You'd have found out soon enough." Duffy rolled a ciga-

rette with shaking fingers. "If I know Kell he didn't pay you before the job was done, did he?"

"He said to come back and he'd—" The Miller kid broke off. "I never tried to kill you for pay, Rincon. It was on account of Loren."

Duffy said, "You've talked enough, kid. Lay quiet. You'll need all your strength. Try a little of that praying I told you about."

"You ever pray, Rincon?"

"No. Maybe I oughta learn." Duffy walked over to the stove where Middleton, looking worried, was standing. "If that kid dies," Duffy said in a low voice, "I'll hang Kyle Kell to a tall tree."

The horses in the corral were acting up again. Catching up his rifle, Duffy went outside. There he saw a mud-splattered man clad in dirty pants and shirt and no hat. His face was bruised. Duffy had no trouble recognizing the sandy-haired Tom Hickam, who had stuck up for him the day of Loren's death.

Hickam said, "I got no gun, I got no horse. But if you're lookin' for a man to fight Mountain, I'm it!"

Chapter 17

KELL AND HIS MEN were on their way back from the canyon where the beef were being held when Charlie Penn intercepted them. Kell ordered the men to a halt and waited for the lank rider to come up. The case of Union-issue field glasses bounced against his thin chest.

Penn was breathing hard from the long ride. He was pushing forty and had been named *segundo*. He was a man anxious to please a boss in these times when a rider who drew regular pay was rich.

"Where the hell you been?" Kell bellowed.

Penn, looking a little frightened at this outburst, said, "You sent me to—"

"Shut up!" Kell snapped. He jerked his head and he and Penn moved out of earshot of the other Skull men.

The storm had cleared. Here in the mountains the sky was a brilliant blue.

"Why you mad at me, boss?" Penn asked.

"I sent you to keep an eye on Carl Miller."

"I went to Rifle Ranch to scout around like you told me," Penn said. "There was a gun fight. It was Carl. He tried for Rincon. And Rincon got him."

Kell smiled, started to rub his jaw, then winced as his fingers contacted the swelling. "What do you mean he got him?"

"Got him dead."

Kell's eyes were shining. "You sure?"

Penn slapped the cased field glasses. "I seen the whole thing through these glasses."

Excitedly Kell asked questions. How was he sure the kid was dead?

"Carl never got up," Penn said. "I didn't wait to see Rincon

bury him. I didn't want Rincon an' that other fella comin' after me so—"

"What other fella?"

"Don't know. Didn't get too good a look at him."

"Well, no matter." Kell grinned. "Rincon's the one I want to get. Those muleheads in Packer won't stir dust if somebody like Ed Loren gets killed. But a kid like Carl Miller. Well, that makes a heap of difference."

"Another thing," Penn said, "I was in Casson's today." He told how Casson had been hit over the head by Rincon.

Kell laughed. "Charlie, you'll earn an extra ten dollars for this."

Kell told his men they were riding to Packer. They would stop by Mountain headquarters and pick up fresh horses. And every man was to be fully armed and have plenty of cartridges.

When Kell reached home, he found his wife almost in tears. "Merry's gone!" she cried. "I've looked every place."

"I'll find her," Kell said. "She won't get far. You're ridin' with me, Suella. We got somethin' important to do."

"I'm not going anywhere with you!" she said defiantly.

He leaned forward. "I can match up that lopsided face of yours by hittin' the other side." He lifted the flat of a big hand.

She drew back, instinctively touching the swollen right side of her face. "Where do you want me to ride with you?"

"Ever seen a man hanged?"

Her mouth fell open. "It's something I never want to see."

"You're goin' to watch Rincon swing by his Texas neck. He killed Carl Miller this mornin'."

"Oh, no, I don't believe that, Kyle. Rincon wouldn't—"

"Yes, he would, and he did." Kell came up to her, his eyes ugly. He pointed to the floor where he had been unconscious last night. "What'd you an' Rincon do when I was out? Cozy?"

"Nothing happened, I told you."

Kell grabbed hold of her.

She said, "Hitting me again won't change my story. It's the truth. I tried to tell you last night."

Kell glared at her for a moment. "After thinkin' it over I don't want you ridin' with me. I don't want you around."

Then, swearing, he went out into the yard.

A few minutes later he was riding out with the crew. The only man left behind was Pap Walcott, who stood in front of the cookshack watching the cavalcade move briskly across the shelf.

Suella hurried across the yard to the old man. "Have you seen Merry?" she cried, breathless.

"I hear she rode out today. She's been doin' it a lot lately. Don't worry."

"But I am worried."

"Did she take her clothes?" the old man asked, and when Suella shook her head, he said, "Then there's nothin' to fret about."

Suella leaned weakly against the cookshack wall. "Oh, my God, how did I ever get into this?"

"You're like a lot of other folks, Suella," Pap Walcott said. "You was tryin' to get somethin' for nothin'. Marry Kyle Kell, you figured, and that would solve all your problems."

"I don't care about myself." She sighed. "It's Merry. I haven't got a cent in the house. Not a cent. I want to send Merry away but I can't even buy a stage ticket. Have you any idea where Kyle keeps his money?"

Pap Walcott turned from looking at the fading dust cloud that marked the passage of the Mountain crew into the valley below. "Wish I could help," he said, his voice softer now. "I got nothin' myself, Suella. I wish I did know where Kyle keeps that money. I'd get it for you. He gets cash gold for them cows. But you'd have to walk him through a hot fire before he'd tell where he's got it hid."

The old man went to the bunkhouse. In a moment he came out, buckling on his gun belt. "Reckon you heard about Carl Miller."

She gave a quick nod of her head. "A terrible thing."

"Kyle sent that kid after Rincon. Promised him money or God knows what. I know it sure as I know there's ground under my boots."

"I guess there's nothing Kyle won't do."

"A scared man is pretty desperate. He does some terrible things."

"Kyle frightened? That's ridiculous."

"I know him better'n any man alive. He's scared of Mexicans. He's scared of losin' his grip on this ranch—" The old man looked up into her distraught face. "I'll get you some money, Suella. I'll get it some way. You got to send Merry away. Somethin' terrible will happen if you don't."

"I know. I feel it here." She put a hand over her heart.

"It ain't just because Merry's a pretty girl. But she's got black hair an' dark eyes—"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"She looks a lot like a girl Kyle knowed in Mexico once. First day Merry come here he told me how much she looked like this other girl. Course she don't at all, 'cause I remember the other girl. It's all in Kyle's mind. A man sees what he wants to see. When a man's gettin' Kyle's age, he wants one last chance at what he thinks is happiness."

Suella's eyes were bitter. "He wanted purity," she said thinly. "He didn't get it with me."

"Don't feel sorry for yourself, Suella," he said sharply. "You're pure as any woman I ever knowed."

"You're a liar, Pap," she said quietly. "You knew about Ed and me."

"I don't blame you for what you done."

"One night Kyle called me a prostitute. Well, he put it worse than that. And I suppose I am in a way."

"Like I said. Don't feel sorry for yourself. You got to think of your sister."

"Where do you think she's gone?"

"Town, maybe. She'll be back." He gave her a steady look. "Be thankful Rincon finished Ed Loren. Your life with Ed wouldn't have been no improvement over the one you got with Kyle. Now if you'll excuse me, I got a bit of ridin' to do."

He walked to the corral and roped out a horse. Suella came over after a moment and asked where he was going. Rifle Creek Ranch, the old man told her.

"If that Miller boy is dead, like Charlie Penn claims,"

Walcott said grimly, "then I'm goin' to kill your husband, Suella. I'm goin' to shoot him in the stomach. And when he's dyin' hard I'm goin' to remind him of a girl down in Mexico he didn't want to marry until too late. I'm goin' to tell him that his boy is livin' in Chihuahua City bein' raised by his grandfolks. I'm goin' to tell Kyle all he missed—"

"Kyle has a son?" Suella sounded incredulous.

The old man nodded. "I got friends down there that write me sometimes." He looked up into her bruised face. "I'm also goin' to tell Kyle about how a man who hits a woman ain't fit to breathe God's air."

Walcott tightened the cinch and climbed into the saddle. Suella said, "Does Kyle know about the boy?"

"He knows there was a son, but that's all he knows. And don't you ever tell him, Suella. Give that boy a chance to grow up. My friends say them grandparents are teachin' him to hate Anglos. It ain't right 'cause he's got Anglo blood in him, bad as Kyle's blood is. But even the way they're raisin' him ain't as bad as if Kyle was doin' the job."

He picked up the reins. "I wish this ranch belonged to Kyle, so that when he's dead you'd have somethin'. You've earned every acre of this place, Suella."

She stood for a long time in the yard, the sun on her face. At last Pap Walcott was out of sight. She shivered as she realized that the little gray man would do exactly what he threatened, if the boy turned out to be dead. He'd shoot Kyle in the stomach and watch him die.

And what of Duffy Rincon? Did she care very much if Kyle got a rope around his neck? She had bargained her pride and herself and Rincon had turned his back on her.

She walked slowly to the house. Pap Walcott had not said whether he thought Rincon had killed the kid or not.

One thing for certain, before this night was out violence would sweep the basin.

Merry realized she must have dozed off. For a moment she couldn't remember where she was. Then she saw the small room, the open doorway, the Mexican girl with the

red paper rose in her hair. The girl had opened the door and Merry guessed this was what had awakened her.

"What is your name?" the Mexican girl asked.

Merry looked puzzled. "I'm sorry, but I don't speak your language."

Soccorro tried again. "Have you come to this place to work?"

Merry spread her hands wide. "Can't you speak even a little English?"

"Do not work for this man Rooley," Soccorro said. "I am happy Señor Rincon beat him."

All Merry could understand of the speech were the two names, Rooley and Rincon.

Leaving her, Soccorro went out and closed the door. She went to another room down the hall and got a key. Then she quietly locked Merry's door from the outside. She crept down into the store where Casson and the beaten Rooley were talking at the far end of the bar. They paid no attention to her. She couldn't understand what they were talking about. The barrier of language was distressing at times.

Unnoticed, she slipped behind the bar, picked up the sawed-off shotgun, and hid the weapon in the folds of her voluminous skirt.

Casson glanced up, frowning, but the shotgun was out of sight. Soccorro said, "Is this new girl to work here?"

Casson turned to Rooley, who said, "Don't worry about it. She will go with me to Tucson."

"I hear Kyle's sweet on the girl," Rooley said to Casson.

"We oughta send word that we got something new here."

Both men laughed.

Soccorro went back upstairs and to her room where she hid the shotgun.

It was sometime later that some twenty-five riders appeared in front of Casson's Store. Soccorro, peering from the upstairs window, saw Kyle Kell and Charlie Penn and some ten men from Skull. The other fifteen, including Ellenbert, the banker-merchant from Packer, were made up of important townspeople with some saloon hangers-on.

Casson was saying across the bar to Kell, "Sure I hate Rincon's guts." He touched the bandage on his head. "It's somethin' I don't figure to forget."

Kell rubbed his jaw. "I ain't goin' to forget what he done to me."

The men were milling around, drinking, talking in low tones. Only a few of them were jovial. Most of them looked grim. Kell showed his dislike for Billy Rooley, and seemed to enjoy seeing the beaten face. "It's the only thing Rincon's done that I agree with."

While Rooley's eyes flashed, Casson said, "Better be careful, Kyle. Rooley's got some good contacts for sellin' beef."

"So have I," Kyle Kell snapped. "I figure maybe you want to ride with us."

"Ride with you where?" Casson said, and was busy setting out bottles and glasses to the men lined up two deep along the bar.

"We're goin' to hang Rincon," Kell said, speaking slow, relishing every word. "He killed Carl Miller."

Casson's eyes pinched tight at the corners. "You plan it this way?"

Kell gave him a wise look, but said for the benefit of the townsmen, "Don't make no difference how it happened. The kid's dead. Rincon done it."

For one of the few times in his life Casson bought a round of drinks. Because this hunting down a man to hang him was a solemn occasion, most of the men did their drinking quietly.

Rooley whispered something to Casson, then stepped away from the bar to watch Kell with as much amusement as his puffy, discolored face could show.

Kell said, "We're both on the same side of the creek now, Mike."

Casson nodded, and leaned close. "I got somethin' special." He nodded toward the second floor.

"Not that Mex gal," Kell said in a low voice. "I won't stand for no Mex around me."

"This ain't a Mex. Go on up. Head of the stairs."

Having consumed enough whisky to make such a sugges-

tion appealing even in the face of the macabre business planned for the day, Kell ducked away from the crowd and made the stairs two at a time. He started for the door Casson had indicated but a Mexican girl suddenly appeared and leveled a sawed-off shotgun at him.

"You leave her alone," Soccorro said. "She is a good girl."

"What you talkin' about!" Kell took a step toward Soccorro, but the girl cocked the shotgun. With an oath Kell tramped back downstairs. He got Casson aside and told him about the girl and the shotgun. Casson glanced at the shelf where the shotgun usually lay. "I'll have to start lockin' that thing up."

He jerked his head at Kell and quietly tiptoed up the stairs. Kell followed. Casson found Soccorro in her room. The shotgun was on the bed. When a board creaked under his weight, she spun and tried to reach the weapon. He beat her to it.

Kell from the doorway said, "If you can't handle your gals, you better get out of the business."

Kell crossed the hall to the room at the head of the stairs. It was locked. He demanded a key.

"Tell her in Spanish," Casson said, jerking his head at Soccorro. "Tell her to get that door unlocked or I'll pitch her out this window."

Kell told her. For a moment she hesitated. Then from the front of her dress she produced a key which she turned over to Kell. Kell unlocked the door across the hall and stepped in.

Casson was beginning to laugh already. He leaned against the wall, supporting his weight with one huge hand. Tears ran across the scarred face. Soccorro looked at him and thought he had lost his mind.

Then there was Merry's shrill voice: "Kyle, get out of my room!"

Kell backed slowly into the hall, his mouth hanging open. Merry, fully dressed, was glaring at him.

Kell found his voice. "What're you doin' here?"

"Just leave me alone! That's all I ask!"

"What are you *doin'* here?" he cried.

"Mr. Rooley has offered me a job, if you must know. And Mr. Casson said I could stay here—"

Kell, his teeth bared, whirled on Casson. "You dirty—"

"Don't say it," Casson warned, and showed him the shotgun. Casson was still laughing. "Stand real easy or they're goin' to scrape you off the ceiling."

He backed Kell down the stairs. The men at the bar stood rigid, staring at them. Outside, the twenty-odd saddle horses stirred restlessly.

"I'm goin' to kill you for this, Casson!" Kell cried. "That's my sister-in-law!"

"I was just gettin' back at you a little, Kyle. For some of the things you done to me."

Ellenbert stepped nervously between the two men. "Let's forget this, boys." The banker turned and grimly looked at the others. "We're gathered here for more important matters. Save your personal grudges till later. You riding with us, Casson?"

Before he could answer, Kell cut in with, "He ain't goin' with us."

"That's fine with me," Casson said.

Kell started for the door, then caught sight of Rooley in a chair tipped back against the wall. He kicked the chair out from under him and Rooley sprawled to the floor. "I seen what the Navajos done once," Kell said, "when a fella like you stole one of their girls. They skinned him. They kept him alive for two days. You could hear him screamin' for ten mile. That's what I oughta do to you!"

"Can't you take a joke, Kyle?" Casson said, and started laughing again. "I just wanted to see your face when you run into your sister-in-law in a back room."

Kell started to say something, but Ellenbert gave him a shove toward the door. Instead of resenting it, Kell moved along. "If we're going to hang Rincon," Ellenbert said, "we better be getting at it."

From the head of the stairs Merry had listened to the talk. And at last she understood what Rooley was. And she also knew what her presence here had meant. She flushed. What

a fool! Blinded to facts in her desire to get away from Mountain.

Now, in looking back on it, she realized Rincon had in so many words warned her against Rooley. He had made her promise not to go to Rooley until he sent for her. And then Rincon had come here and beaten Rooley up.

And they were going to hang him. But why? Those men she saw riding out now in the yard below, most of them were from Packer. She had seen them around the town; the substantial citizens. And this faction led by Ellenbert had joined with Kyle Kell and his crew to put an end to Duffy Rincon by hanging.

Then she heard Casson downstairs saying, "So Rincon killed the Miller kid. And Kyle has stirred up the better element, as they call themselves, to go ridin' with a rope."

Merry fled down the back stairs. In the corral she managed to saddle the horse she had ridden from Mountain. As she rode it away from the store, Casson, coming to the back door, shouted at her to stop.

She kept on going. She knew that if she followed Rifle Creek it would take her to the ranch. She rode hard in that direction, seeing to the west the dust left by the slower-moving posse. Maybe she could beat them to the Rifle Creek place and warn Rincon. She owed him that much for beating Rooley on her account. She tried not to let herself think about the killing of Carl Miller.

She followed the creek down through a steep canyon where rock walls towered on every side. The loneliness frightened her. She should have taken the road, but then the posse would have seen her when she passed them. At last she came to a collection of run-down buildings. She knew she had reached her destination because there was a Skull brand burned over the door.

She was surprised to see Pap Walcott coming from the house at a run. He anxiously helped her from the saddle. There was another man in the yard, a stranger, his face sunburned, handsome in a way.

Then Tom Hickam was coming from the corral, wearing pants and a shirt many-sizes too big for him.

She told Walcott about the men on their way to hang Rincon, and the reason for it.

"But Carl ain't dead," Walcott said. "He's in the house. I reckon he'll pull through." Then Walcott's face changed. "Rincon's gone to Packer. You say them fellas left Casson's Store?"

Merry nodded, distraught. "They seemed to be taking their time, and—"

Walcott swore softly. "Rincon will run into that bunch sure as Sunday." He hurried for his horse, his bowed legs scissoring shadows across the yard.

Middleton hurried after him, his face white. "I'm going with you. It's my fight."

"You and Hickam stay here and watch Carl and the gal. I'll handle Kyle." Then Walcott licked his lips and added, "If I ain't too late."

Because she had been through so much, Merry's strength was suddenly gone. She slumped forward, and Middleton, coming up, caught her. As Walcott thundered out of the yard, Middleton carried the girl into the house and revived her with coffee.

Tom Hickam said through bruised lips, "Reckon you're as glad to get away from Mountain as I am." Hickam jerked a thumb at the man with the sunburned face. "This here is Middleton hisself. He's been callin' hisself Joe Rand. But Rincon said we might as well know who we're workin' for."

"We're going to run Kyle Kell clear to Sonora," Middleton said grimly. "That's the way Rincon put it."

Merry, sitting on a keg, suddenly put her hands to her eyes. "What will happen to Suella. Oh, my poor sister."

"You better be savin' your tears for Duffy Rincon," Hickam said, fingering his rifle. "If he's dead, we might as well start ridin' fast. The whole lot of us."

Chapter 18

SEVERAL THINGS HAD HAPPENED this day that made Duffy feel that maybe, after all, the fight would be worth while. First, Tom Hickam had arrived, cursing Kell, offering to work for no pay for Rifle Creek until beef could be sold. Second, the kid seemed to be recovering faster than Duffy had hoped. In his long and violent career Duffy had gained much knowledge of bullet wounds. Barring infection, the kid would make it.

In addition to these happenings Randolph Middleton II seemed to be hardening up, showing a natural ability. It would take him a long time to learn the cattle business, but he was trying.

Because maintaining secrecy concerning Middleton's identity no longer seemed necessary with Tom Hickam's presence, Duffy introduced them. Hickam seemed surprised to meet the owner of Skull Mountain and Rifle Creek ranches.

Now, as Duffy headed along the Packer road on this bright afternoon, he knew he had three men with him at least: Middleton, Hickam, and the kid, once he recovered sufficiently to sit a saddle.

This morning Duffy had discussed the matter with Middleton. They agreed that Ellenbert was the only one who could help them. They needed some cash and also a close market for beef. Duffy had given up the idea of riding to Prescott for a crew. He would try to talk the banker-merchant into joining them. With Middleton actually on the scene it would give the operation the necessary stature. Duffy intended to ask Ellenbert to send word to Prescott by the stage driver, saying that Rifle Creek was hiring men. Duffy hoped things would work out this way.

Middleton had suggested he be the one to ride to Packer

and talk to the banker. But Duffy had turned down the idea. The Packer road passed Casson's Store. There was no telling what sort of idea Casson might get into his head since he'd had his skull cracked by a revolver barrel. Any man remotely connected with one Duffy Rincon might not fare too well if he couldn't take care of himself. Duffy decided it was safer to have Ellenbert come to Rifle Creek for a day or so, have a look around, talk to Middleton, and then make them a small loan. Enough to tide them over until some cows could be sold.

He kept his horse at a jog, scowling blackly now at the mountains. They reminded him of the first day he had come here, confident of finding fifteen men on the Rifle Creek pay roll, as Middleton had claimed during their talk in Kansas. Confident of finding a place fit for a man to live, not a broken-down wreck of a place where one foreman named Edmonds had already died.

Coming toward him suddenly around a bend was a large body of riders, their horses at a walk. Alerted, he reined in. The riders, a hundred yards away, had seen him and one of them shouted: "There's Rincon! Let's get him!"

He jerked free his rifle, surprised that one of the riders was Ellenbert, the very man he had been on his way to see. He saw Kell and some of the Mountain crew.

He spurred his horse off the road into some timber and immediately they began to fire at him. Whatever he might have thought when he first saw them, one thing was clear now: they meant business. As they spurred toward him, he hammered off a shot that sent Kell ducking low in the saddle. There was a burst of firing. Duffy felt his horse sag in the forelegs and start to pile up. And in a matter of days he had his second mount shot out from under him. He kicked clear of the stirrups, fought off with a forearm mesquite lunging up at his face. Then he struck the ground, rolling. Dazedly he scrambled to his knees, the old wound above his right ear throbbing. He looked around for his rifle, couldn't find it. As horses came crashing in around him, the riders shouting, he dropped back his hand, but his fingers encountered an empty holster.

Neither the revolver jolted from his holster in the spill nor the rifle knocked from his hands would have done him much good, anyway. He was in a circle of rifle barrels slanting down, held by grim-faced and sweating men. If he took one step, they'd shoot him to pieces. Slowly he got to his feet, not missing the triumphant glitter in Kell's eyes.

He addressed himself to Ellenbert. The banker wore a dusty black suit, and the front of a white shirt showed rings of perspiration. "What's the idea?" Duffy demanded.

"Murder, Mr. Rincon. You killed Ed Loren and it's one thing. Murder a boy in cold blood and it's quite another." Some of the other men flanking Ellenbert nodded in agreement.

"Who says I murdered a boy?" Duffy cried.

Kell jerked his head at the lank Charlie Penn with the nervous Adam's apple. Penn worked his horse through the press of riders and said, "I seen you kill him, Rincon. Seen you through field glasses. You killed the Miller kid."

"Where'd you bury the kid?" Kell demanded.

Duffy never took his eyes from Ellenbert. "I shot Miller, yes. After he tried to kill me. Carl is alive at Rifle Creek."

"Liar!" Kell shouted.

Duffy saw a faint indecision on Ellenbert's face when he said, "Ride with me, boys. And you can ask the kid to his face whether he's alive or dead."

Kell impatiently shoved his horse between Ellenbert and Duffy. "Don't listen to Rincon! He wants us to ride to Rifle Creek. Likely he's got some Texas hellions there. They can blow us outa the saddle. I say let's look for a tree limb."

At a signal from Kell two of the Mountain crew left the main body of riders and pushed east. And in a minute one of them shouted, "Over here, Kell. Lots of cottonwoods!"

"Let's get it over with," Kell said.

Ellenbert held up a frantic hand. "Wait a minute now—"

The banker was shouted down. But in the turmoil Duffy managed to shout: "Give me a chance, Ellenbert. The kid's alive at the ranch."

"It seems the least we can do, Kell," Ellenbert said, "is to—"

"We ain't goin' to stand for nobody in this country that kills a kid!" Kell shouted. There was a rumble of assent from the men.

Ringed by rifles, Duffy knew he had no chance unless he talked. And he knew that, aside from Ellenbert, every other man in the cavalcade seemed bent on swinging him from a tree. He saw in the crowd several of those who had been in the Rimrock Saloon at Packer the day he had tried to hire men. The saloonman with the pitted face was glaring at him. And Duffy remembered all too well that he had practically accused some of these men of being yellow because they wouldn't sign on with him.

A man never knew when words uttered in anger and frustration were going to condemn him. He saw the resentment in the eyes of these men, their dislike.

Kell said, "Take a good look at the sky, Rincon. It'll never look so blue again to you!"

Some of the men had dismounted, and as Kell jerked his swollen chin they came at Duffy from three sides. He was smashed down and with a knee in his back, others holding his feet, two more bending his hands behind his back, he felt thongs chewing into wrists. They set him on his feet.

"So this is it," Duffy said bitterly. He glared at Ellenbert, who avoided his eyes. "You play Kell's game against Middleton. Now let me tell you something. Middleton is at Rifle Creek Ranch right now!"

Ellenbert's head jerked up. "Middleton—here?"

Kell swung down, standing spraddle-legged. "Another lie!"

"The truth," Duffy said.

"I just got a letter from Middleton," Kell said. "Middleton said he was goin' to fire you. Said he found out you're wanted real bad back in Texas."

Duffy said through his teeth, "Turn me loose. Just for five minutes. I'll make you eat that, Kell!"

"You'll never be turned loose again. Until you're dead!" Kell gave him a vicious smile.

Ellenbert, looking frightened and uncertain, uttered a feeble protest. "What if Middleton is here? This should

bear some looking into. I'm not sure I want to be a party to this, Kell."

A faint worry touched Kell's eyes. That Middleton might actually have summoned nerve enough to come West and inspect his inherited property apparently had never occurred to anyone.

Ellenbert was looking at the saloonman with the pitted face. "I think we'd better discuss this, Grimm—"

"He likely killed the kid all right," Grimm said, giving Duffy a baleful look. "If he didn't, there ain't much harm done. Hangin' a Texian ain't no loss."

"Middleton is in Chicagol" Kell roared. "And Rincon knows damn well he is!" He lashed out with sudden fury, the fist striking Duffy in the chest. The blow drove him back into the group of men who had ganged up on him and tied his wrists. Lowering his head, Duffy lunged at Kell, intending to ram him in the stomach. But he was hauled back.

Kell's adherents outnumbered the reluctant handful of townsmen led by Ellenbert. And Duffy knew what the outcome of this very likely would be. In a few minutes he would have his life cut off by a loop of rope.

"Somebody loan him a horse!" Kell said.

One of the men gave up a dun. Duffy was boosted into the saddle. The group of riders moved farther away from the road, the man who had given up the dun riding double on a big sorrel. Within a quarter of a mile they came to cottonwoods where a noose dangled from a thick limb, the other end of the rope tied to a sapling some distance away.

Ellenbert had been trying to fight his horse close to the tree with the noose. "I don't like this," he said nervously to Kell.

"You were willin' enough when I told you about him killin' the kid. Well, nothin's changed. Miller's dead."

"But he swears the kid is alive. Why can't we go to Rifle Creek and verify it—"

"No!" Kell cried. "We'll ride into an ambush." He looked around meaningfully at the townsmen. "A lot of you boys won't get home to your wives tonight if we try that."

And Duffy could see that some of them, at least, were impressed by this talk of riding into a Texas trap.

But one of them said, "I ain't so sure we're doin' the right thing."

Duffy took a last hold on his life. "If you do this, Middleton will have the sheriff up here from Prescott. This'll be murder!"

Ellenbert, licking his lips, said, "He's right, Kell. This will be murder." And there was hearty agreement to this from the citizens of Packer. Even the saloonman Grimm seemed to have been impressed by this talk of murder.

Kell's eyes suddenly brightened. There was a faint gleam of teeth through the tangle of mustache and beard. He rode close and tied the reins of the dun to the saddle horn. He slipped the noose over Duffy's head. Then he turned to the riders, smiling. "We're just scarin' this Texian," he said. "We're puttin' the fear of God in him. Now let's ride up the road a piece and talk this over."

"That horse will spook and leave him hanging," Ellenbert said, his face losing color. "If Middleton goes to the sheriff—"

"Will any of us see Rincon hang?" Kell said with exaggerated surprise. "Hell, we just left him sittin' here. Every damn one of us can swear he was alive when we left. We just figured to let him sweat a little and consider his sins."

"Don't listen to him," Duffy said. "It's still murder." He sat tensely, feeling the sweat on the back of his neck. The rope was rough against his throat. Overhead the limb creaked as a sudden breeze brushed the cottonwood. The dun's ears twitched. The men looked at him and then looked away.

"That kid is alive," Duffy appealed again. "Ride and see for yourselves."

Kell turned to the townsmen grouped together, looking glum and uncertain. "Let's move, boys. Leave Rincon here for a spell. Then we'll come back and see if he's ready to tell us the truth about that kid."

Duffy glared at Ellenbert. "Since when do you take Kell's word about anything?"

"I-I—" The banker's mouth fluttered open, then closed. His eyes looked sick.

"Now you can get me out of the way," Duffy said scornfully. "You can lease or sell those sections to Kell. You and him can complete the job of ruining Middleton."

"Now see here—" Ellenbert flushed.

Duffy said, "If you've got any guts at all, take a gun and stop this thing."

Kell moved his horse between Duffy and the banker. His Mountain hands held their rifles steady. They might be a harassed, ill-paid lot, but they knew where their security lay, such as it was. If Kell gave the word, some saddles would be catching the sun instead of the calloused rumps of the men from Packer.

Grimm, with the pitted face, said, "Let's do what Kell says." He looked at Ellenbert who seemed to be wilting in the saddle. "We ain't hangin' anybody. Rincon is alive. We never seen him dead."

And in a moment the men reined their horses and moved away, all but Kell, who lingered for a final word with the man he hated.

"I'm goin' to let you sweat, Rincon," he said through his teeth. "Maybe before we're back to the road that dun will jump out from under you. Maybe it'll be ten minutes. Or half an hour. Or an hour. All the time you'll set there sweatin'. Never knowin' what minute is your last."

Then Kell was gone with the rest and Duffy did not dare shout, for it might spook the dun. If the horse ran out from under him, the sudden drop to the end of the rope could easily break his neck.

He should have stayed home, he told himself. All his life he had never worked more than a hundred miles from Rincon, save for the cattle drives to Kansas. And this job here with Middleton. A Texan, it seemed, had no luck any place save in Texas.

"Easy, boy, easy," Duffy said in hushed desperation as the dun arched its neck to nibble at a triangle of grass.

He died fifty times in the next minute. This was it. This

was death. The dun moved forward a halting step to new grass. The rope was taut from tree limb to his neck.

"Easy, boy. Hold up, boy. Ho, boy." His throat was so dry he could hardly speak. He felt the dun tense.

One of the men had dropped a bandanna. It lay, a crumpled wad of dirty red cloth, on the ground. A breeze flicked the piece of cloth. The dun shifted its forefeet, head high.

"Don't spook now," Duffy pleaded. "Easy, boy, easy."

The breeze tapered off, and the cloth lay still.

The dun went back to the grass. Duffy, his shirt soaked coldly with sweat, felt as if he had managed to get one foot, at least, out of his grave.

Chapter 19

IT WAS A HALF-HOUR LATER when Walcott reached the junction of the Packer and Mountain Ranch roads. Here some twenty riders were arguing vehemently. They turned to look at the old man as he rode up.

"Where's Rincon?" Walcott demanded.

"Probably dead by this time," Ellenbert said, and glared at Kell. "I didn't want to go off and leave him, but—"

"Shut up," Kell said, and Ellenbert turned red. Kell ignored him. "What're you doin' here, Pap? You're s'posed to be at Mountain."

"I rode to Rifle Creek to see if the Miller kid was dead." Pap Walcott's gaze was steady on Kell's bearded face. "He ain't dead."

This announcement was met by cold silence. The men were exchanging glances, some of them looking a little sick.

"Why you takin' Rincon's part?" was all Kell could think to say.

"I ain't takin' his part," Walcott said, his voice hard. "I swore if that boy was dead I'd kill you, Kyle. And he ain't dead, like I said. Carl told me how it happened. Just like I thought, you put him up to it. You promised him five hundred dollars. But that ain't why he tried to get Rincon. He done it to get even for Loren. You played up Loren to the kid, as I figured you had."

Kell's eyes were dangerous. "You're a little late, Pap. Rincon's hangin' high an' dry."

"If he's dead," Pap said, looking around, "they ought to hang the lot of you."

Ellenbert licked his lips. "He's sure dead by now. We left him settin' the saddle of a skittish horse, with a rope around his neck. He's got no chance. No chance at all."

"Where'd you leave him?" the old man demanded.

"'Bout seven mile back. Quarter of a mile east of the road."

"My God, I come right by that place."

Kell, sensing a growing antagonism on the part of the Packer men, signaled his own riders to pull away a few yards. There Kell sat with thick forearms crossed over the horn, his eyes wicked. "I don't give a damn what I've done. If the kid's alive, what about it? I'm runnin' Mountain to suit myself—" He turned his shaggy head. "Pap, Rincon tried to say Middleton's at Rifle Creek. You see him?"

Walcott hesitated a moment, then said, "There's a fella named Joe Rand there."

Kell smiled triumphantly and looked around. "I told you Rincon was a goddam liar." He got ready to ride. "You comin', Pap?"

"I'm through with you, Kyle."

"You fight me and you'll be a dead old man."

"The years are crowdin' up on me. I'll be a dead old man anyhow."

Fury stained Kell's face. "Get outa this country, Pap. I see you and I'll—"

"Shoot me?" Pap cut in. "Use a gun like you done once in Mexico, Kyle?"

"Don't say no more." Kell's voice was deadly. "I mean it, Pap."

"Boys, here's the prime rattlesnake of all time," Pap said. "Kyle Kell, the fella that killed the mother of his own son!"

Into the shocked silence Kell shouted insanely, "Nobody knows whether it was me or Howie that killed her!" Then his voice trailed off. He glared around at the shocked faces. Then Kell's gun came whipping up, and horses shied, and men yelled in protest.

Pap, sitting his saddle, hands spread wide from his thin old body, smiled coldly at the man he had ridden with for so many years. When Kell hesitated, Pap said, "Go ahead, Kyle. I ain't drawin' on you. Kill me, and sometime, someplace, they're goin' to tie your neck to a tree!"

Kell let his gaze slide from the icy gaze of the old man

to the other faces. And even he knew that you couldn't shoot down an old man in front of witnesses. Not unless you killed everyone present. And looking at his own crew and seeing open dislike in some of their eyes, he curbed his temper.

"You're lucky, old man," he said, holstering his gun.

"You're through, Kyle," Pap Walcott said. "Rincon was right. Middleton is at Rifle Ranch. He's come out to see the kind of scum deal you been givin' him. He'll bring the law up here next and start countin' beef—"

"You was in it with me!"

"Like I said, the years are crowdin' in, Kyle. I don't give much of a damn one way or the other." He showed his broken yellow teeth. "And Middleton ain't the only one at Rifle Creek. Merry's there. She hates you worse than wolf poison, Kyle."

Kyle Kell turned white. He neck reined his horse, shouted at his men, and they swung in behind him, a few of them with apparent reluctance.

Ellenbert said, when they had gone, "Let's go find Rincon."

Pap Walcott fixed the banker-merchant with a cold eye. "If Rincon's still alive, I don't reckon he'd want to look on such a bunch of gutless wimmen as you!"

With that Walcott turned his horse and went back down the road toward Rifle Creek.

Duffy Rincon sat stiffly in the saddle, hardly daring to draw breath. The noose was choking him now, for the dun had begun to crop the farthest grass. Duffy leaned forward and began to tighten the muscles of his throat, relaxing them, pulling the rope up, up toward his chin. He began to move his jaws from side to side, keeping the pressure on the rope. Several minutes of doing this, while the dun grazed, while he pleaded with the animal, and gripped its barrel in the vise of his knees, and the noose loosened. He worked it up over his chin, moving his jaws, exerting pressure. The harsh hemp slipped up a fraction of an inch. It seemed an age before he got it over his chin. Cautiously he moved his head from side to side, the noose scraping across his lips, to hang

up under his nose. He worked his jaws again and it loosened the noose a bit more. Then it was over his nose, sliding up across his eyes, his forehead.

It fell free. And the dun, lifting its head as a breeze swayed the cottonwood, saw the rolling bandanna. The dun jumped, came down four feet away, stiff-legged. Unable to maintain his balance because of the tied wrists, Duffy fell. He struck his head. That was the last thing he remembered until he heard Pap Walcott shouting his name, shaking him to consciousness.

Chapter 20

BECAUSE SHE HAD NO PLACE TO GO and none of them had enough money to purchase a stage ticket and provide subsequent living expenses, Merry Dunn stayed at Rifle Creek. Pap Walcott passed on a message for her when he ran into some of the Mountain crew.

"Tell Mrs. Kell that her sister is stayin' at Rifle Creek. She's happy. And Mrs. Kell ain't to worry."

"And how about you, Pap?" one of the men asked.

"I'm Rifle Creek," Pap Walcott said. "All the way."

Kell's crew, what was left of it, had little stomach for the way things had turned out. Several men quit, making a point to ride hard and fast so as to put plenty of distance between themselves and Kell. Aside from the poor pay, knowing they were working for a man who had shot the mother of his son was more than a lot of them could stand. They were all of them damned sick of Kell's unpredictable temper, but only a few had the nerve to pull out so far.

Duffy moved Carl Miller down to the bunkhouse, where the kid continued his steady recovery. He still couldn't understand why Duffy had not taken a gun and finished him when he had the chance. This attitude of forgiveness on the part of a man he had tried to kill was overwhelming to Carl Miller. He brooded about it and talked it over with Merry on the times when she came down from the house where she lived alone.

She did the cooking for them as she had for her late aunt back in Joplin. Duffy found himself, for the first time in years, looking forward to meals. But he wasn't home much. He would leave Middleton at headquarters to guard Merry and the kid. Then he and Tom Hickam and Walcott would work the range. Short-handed as they were, the best they

could round up was two hundred head, which they held in Rifle Creek Canyon.

Duffy never allowed himself to think of the near hanging if he could help it. But whenever he boarded the dun it was immediately brought home to him.

On the third day after they had tried to kill him, Duffy rode home with Walcott and Hickam to find Ellenbert at headquarters. With the banker-merchant were some of the townsmen who had been in the hanging party that day.

Duffy drew rein, regarding them coldly. Ellenbert gave Duffy an awkward smile as the latter swung down. In the growing silence Merry came into the yard.

Ellenbert cleared his throat. "We're ashamed of lettin' Kyle talk us into that business the other day. We'd admire to help you out, Rincon."

"What's the matter?" Duffy demanded thinly. "Afraid that if Kell isn't stopped he'll be walking in your direction next?"

Ellenbert flushed. "Reckon we deserve that, Rincon. I honestly didn't think you could fight Kell and win. But now I do. You've got more guts than anybody I ever knew."

"Sort of changed your fiddlin' tune," Duffy commented humorlessly.

Ellenbert licked his lips. "You're going to whip Kell. I feel it. And when you do, I'm willing to lease you my sections. You can still work for Middleton here, and run your own beef at the same time."

Duffy bit back a curse as the idea began to circulate in his mind. And the possibilities warmed him suddenly. He glanced at Merry, who stood near the sagging veranda, her dark eyes watching him. And at her side stood Middleton, tanned now, leaner about the face, his eyes tighter at the corners, his mouth not quite so relaxed. A man who still had a lot to learn, but a man who was getting his education in oversize doses. And managing to survive at the same time. Duffy wondered, then, if Middleton perhaps didn't resemble his late Uncle Howie a little. Perhaps not on the surface, but underneath, where it would count on the long trail of a man's life.

When he saw the way Middleton was glancing at Merry, Duffy could not hide the quick jealousy that touched his eyes.

Merry must have misinterpreted his mood, for she said quickly, "Forgive these men, Duffy. You forgave Carl Miller. Surely you can do as much for them."

"Carl is a kid," Duffy said. "A sixteen-year-old who isn't responsible for his actions. Grown men are."

She came slowly across the yard, dark head held high. Because she had no change of clothing she wore one of Duffy's shirts, the tails tied at the waist, and a pair of his levis, rolled up, belted, and almost doubled around her narrow waist.

"You're a good man, Duffy," she said. "Carl and I were talking about it yesterday. He sees in you something he never saw in Ed Loren. You've brought out the best in him. Simply because you hold no resentment, no bitterness for what he tried to do. And you seek no revenge."

And Duffy, looking at her now, wanted to forget this talk. He wanted to take her by the hand and lead her where the grass was green, where they could see the mountains. He wanted to tell her everything about himself. How he really didn't know who he was. Raised by an old saloonman named Duffy. And a woman named Gypsy. He wanted to tell her of the goodness in these people. How this man Duffy would water his whisky maybe and if pressed do fancy things with a deck of cards. But who never turned a hungry man away or refused to pass out a silver dollar to a man beating a hot trail into Mexico. How the woman Gypsy found in an abandoned kid something she had missed. How, when he grew older, she wanted to change, and how the town of Rincon, growing now out of its years of tough men and their kind of women, peopled now with those who termed themselves respectable, would not let her forget what she once had been. How she turned one night into a darkened room and put the muzzle of a revolver into her mouth and pressed the trigger.

Merry was the first woman he had ever wanted to tell these things to. Because she was the first that had mattered

to him. And why or how this thing had happened he did not know.

And he felt that perhaps in a small way, a very small way that could burgeon in time, she shared this feeling.

And because of her he said to Ellenbert, "A man of thirty has to think of the future." It took moral courage to put out his hand to this spineless man who had let Kell almost hang him. Yet he did shake hands with him. And he felt Ellenbert's eagerness to be of service. He shook hands with the other men who had come.

"I had a long talk with Middleton," Ellenbert said, "before you came today. You are what this country needs. This is good land. The only thing wrong has been the people." He turned to Middleton, who still stood by the veranda. "Is it a secret?" he asked, and Middleton shook his head.

Ellenbert said, looking at Duffy, "He's going to stay here. He's through with Chicago." Ellenbert cleared his throat. "The loans that were made on Rifle Creek and Mountain"—he looked pained—"were made—well, they were made by me. No bank in Chicago would loan on land unseen, or cattle uncounted. So I made the loans through a Chicago banker friend. I—well, it was an underhanded thing to do perhaps. But I thought as long as he was going to lose the property anyway I might as well have my bid in. But now, thanks to you, Rincon, he's not going to lose it. One good beef sale and I'll be paid off."

"With good interest," Middleton said, coming to stand beside Merry. "This land is where I should have lived all along, Duffy. For the first time I feel like a man."

Duffy said, "We all can grow if we're lucky enough to find the right place to put down roots."

Ellenbert smiled and said, "Middleton has found a lot more than land and cattle. He's going to grow with this country in the only way a man can really grow. Through his sons. He and Merry are going to be married."

Duffy stood rigid and knew his face was collapsing. He saw Merry watching him, and he looked away and counted the posts in the corral fence.

Middleton said, "I know now that the girl in Chicago

wasn't for me. We never would have been happy together." He reached for Merry's hand. "You don't seem pleased, Duffy."

Duffy turned, and his voice cut like a whiplash. "You figure to get married before or after we get rid of Kyle Kell?"

Middleton seemed bewildered. "But, Duffy—"

"We've all made a lot of fine speeches here today. About the future. There'll be no future as long as Kell sits up there at Mountain. And you know it."

He got his horse and swung into the saddle. "Make yourselves at home, boys," he said to Ellenbert and the others, forcing his lips in a grin that was stiff as wire. "I've got business."

Having no destination in mind, he rode out on the Packer road. In a moment he heard a rider coming after him. It was Pap Walcott who swung in beside the dun.

"A man likes a girl," the old man said, looking straight ahead. "He oughta tell her."

"Who're you talking about, Pap?"

"I didn't know you liked her. Reckon she didn't neither. Merry I'm talkin' about."

Duffy laughed harshly. "She's not even twenty. I'm thirty. Middleton is the right age. Besides, he'll be a big man in this country once I get Rifle Creek and Mountain on a paying basis. If I do. If I'm lucky with Kell. If not, Middleton and Merry can sit back and hire another man and eventually they'll find somebody unburied who can finish Kell for them."

"You're bitter as hell about this."

"Am I?"

"I tell you one thing about Merry. She was so all-fired scared after what she went through with Rooley and Casson that a mite of her confidence is gone. She figured she could lick the world all by herself. Stand on her own two feet, as she puts it. Well, she'll marry the first good man that asks her. Because she doesn't want to be a responsibility to her sister. She figures Suella's taken care of her long enough."

"Pap, how many head of beef has Kell got left at Mountain?"

"Roughly eight hundred."

Duffy swore. "There should be three thousand head on the two ranches, at least."

"He's sold around two thousand head, Duffy."

"Where's he keep the money?"

"It would take a 'Pache with a hot knife to get that out of him."

"Maybe I've got a little Indian in me, Pap. I don't know who my folks were. There's a lot of Indian blood parceled out down my way. Just maybe I'm the boy who's got that hot knife."

"You ain't the kind to torture a man, Duffy."

"I'm the kind to finish up a job he doesn't like and clear out."

"You ain't stayin' after everything is fixed?"

"I'm going back to Texas. Home to Texas. I never should've left."

When he had himself under control Duffy rode back. It was a silent meal that night. Ellenbert said he knew Major Aldyce at Fort Rogers. The major needed beef. And a deal could be made.

"You could push a herd through, Duffy," Ellenbert said.

"You call two hundred head a herd?"

"It's a start," Middleton put in.

Merry came back from the bunkhouse where she had taken supper to the kid. She seemed subdued.

It was agreed that they would start pushing the herd east to the fort tomorrow. Duffy would take four men and, with a letter from Ellenbert in his pocket, figured to have little trouble. At least Ellenbert was optimistic.

After supper Ellenbert and the other townsmen mounted up for the ride back to Packer. Duffy, smoking a cigar, reluctantly thanked the man for the contact at the fort. He still had not thawed out completely from the near hanging of the other day.

When Ellenbert had gone, Middleton said, "You don't act the same, Duffy. Has it angered you that Merry and I—"

Duffy turned on him, wanting to pin Middleton against the corral fence. Then he fought down the urge. It was none of his business anyway what went on between Middleton

and the girl. When he thought of them together here alone, the possibilities took crazy paths through his mind, like ants when a campfire has been laid on their nest.

"You and the girl—" he couldn't even bear to call her by name for fear his voice would betray how he felt— "better go to Packer and stay till this thing is over."

"Our place is here—with you."

Duffy shook his head. "Kell's been too quiet to suit me. There's big trouble building up. I feel it. Rifle Creek is no place for a girl like Merry."

"But I can't go to town with her. It wouldn't look right—"

"You can find somebody to marry you. Or go down to Prescott and get the job done."

"You seem anxious to get rid of us."

"You won't be any good—either one of you—if there's a fight."

Middleton looked hurt. "I thought you were starting to have confidence in me. A little, anyway. I'm not going to run. It's something I've been doing all my life."

Duffy went down to the bunkhouse and asked Carl Miller how he was coming. The kid managed to grin up from his blankets. He looked homelier than ever. He had lost weight, and the rough color of sun and wind was gone from his smooth face. "I'm comin' along, Duffy."

"You'll be all right." And Duffy, although he did not feel like it, passed the grin back.

"I—I guess I was a damn fool about Ed Loren," the kid said. "I know it now. You're the best there is, Duffy."

The next day they went to get the two hundred cows out of the canyon and started on the trail. They were five miles east with the herd when Middleton caught up with them. Duffy was furious. "I told you to stay with Merry!"

"Her sister sent a note. She's very ill."

Duffy's eyes hardened. "You didn't let Merry go!"

"She insisted. I wanted to accompany her but she wouldn't hear of it. So I thought I'd better see you—"

"You let her ride alone all the way to Mountain?"

"A man came for her. He had the note from her sister. She knew the man. His name is Charlie Penn."

Duffy looked at Pap Walcott. The old man had cut up through the dust of the herd to see what the trouble was. Duffy told him. Walcott looked grim.

Tom Hickam was standing up in his stirrups. Two men Ellenbert had sent to help them were looking back. The herd plodded on, breaking now to seek grass.

"That girl's got a prize in you, Middleton," Duffy said thinly. "A real prize."

Middleton flushed. "What could I do? It's her own sister. She wouldn't listen to me at all—"

"You boys keep the herd moving," Duffy snapped.

"Where you figure to go?" Pap Walcott said.

"After Merry. Where else do you think I'd go?" But he was already spurring his horse and he didn't know whether Walcott heard him or not.

Chapter 21

THAT MORNING Suella wrote the note to Merry.

. . . I am desperately ill. Please come at once. And come alone. This is very important. Come alone. You say you owe me a lot for supporting you all these years. You can partially repay me by doing what I ask.

Your sister, Suella.

She wrote quite calmly, Kell standing over her, watching every word she formed with the scratchy pen. He had taken her so by surprise that she'd had no alternative but to comply. But everything would be all right. The note would never be delivered. Kyle had overstepped himself just once too often. Now that she had made up her mind what had to be done, she felt quite calm. She had even protested a little about writing the letter because Kyle would expect it of her. When he read over the finished note, he said it was well put.

As he stood there in the kitchen she calmly crossed over to the coffee grinder on the shelf and reached behind it. Yesterday she had gone to the bunkhouse when Kyle wasn't watching and there were no men around. Most of the crew had left. The place seemed almost deserted. In the bunkhouse she was rewarded. She found a revolver, old, with cheap carving of rosebuds on the ivory plates. It was Carl Miller's gun. The kid had left it behind. One of the men had evidently found it after the kid strapped on Ed Loren's revolver, and placed the old weapon in the kid's bunk.

She had hidden the gun for just such an emergency as this. Well, Kyle had had his way long enough. He had been worse lately. He had come home the other night, raving like a madman because he'd muffed his chance to hang Duffy

Rincon. This attempted hanging was just one more mark against Kyle Kell. One more thing to settle the score of humanity against him.

Now, with the note lying on the table, she reached behind the coffee grinder and brought out the revolver.

"You're not baiting a trap for my sister, Kyle," she said, her voice steady. And she pulled the trigger as fast as she could. She saw the hammer rise and fall, rise and fall. Heard the click-click-click.

Kyle was laughing at her. Then the laughter stopped and he crossed the room and tore the weapon from her trembling fingers. "I unloaded it yesterday," he said.

She was surprised he didn't hit her. Stuffing the empty gun in his belt, he snatched up the note and went out. In a few minutes she saw Charlie Penn riding south.

This is the end, she thought. The very end of everything. She sank cross-legged on the dirt floor and began to weep.

After Kell had given Charlie Penn the note and watched the man ride hard for Rifle Creek, he stood in the yard a long time. Every blessed thing he tried to do lately had gone wrong. Why in the world had he let Ellenbert and those fools from town interfere in the hanging of Rincon? Why had he gotten them in on it in the first place? Only to give the thing a little respectability, if a lynching could ever possess such an element. Just in case a sheriff decided to come north and look around. You couldn't very well put everyone in this corner of Arizona in jail just because a renegade Texan had been hanged. You couldn't jail Ellenbert and the solid citizens of Packer.

Rincon's luck was too incredible. How many times had he escaped death? Well, a man had just so much luck in the barrel. It wouldn't stay full forever.

Several of his men had quit him and he knew the rest were on the point of fleeing. He knew then that his stingy ways, poor pay, the berating, had not purchased loyalty. Only in the cases of the sycophants like Charlie Penn was he reasonably assured of support. The greatest blow was when Pap Walcott had gone over to the other side

of the creek as Mike Casson would say. Just thinking of the giant store owner, saloonkeeper, rustler, and what have you, was enough to set his temples pounding.

That business of having Merry in an upstairs room was something he would not soon forget. He cursed Casson under his breath. Now, of all times, he could use Casson and the men he was able to round up.

Well, in a matter of hours he'd have Merry right where he wanted her. Of everything that had happened to him, Merry turning to Rincon had been the worst.

As he had done lately he fell to thinking of the dark-haired Mexican girl who had been the mother of his son. He knew without a doubt who had killed her. He, Kyle Kell, had pulled the trigger on a murderous rifle as he and Howie Middleton were fleeing the pack of Mexican pursuers. He, Kyle Kell, had seen the slim figure topple from the horse. Had seen the velvet hat torn loose as the rider fell. Had seen the long, flowing black hair.

Howie Middleton had not shot her, although Kell had let Howie in later years suffer partial blame. For Howie had been facing front, spurring his horse, when this one terrible shot had erupted from Kyle Kell's rifle. In a numbing daze Kell had ridden the rest of the way to camp and then to the border.

Well, he could not remake his life. But Pap Walcott the other day had touched the raw nerve end that had never healed. The old man had flung it in his face, in front of the Mountain crew and the townsmen.

For one of the few times in his life Kell regretted the wasted years. The years when he could have built instead of destroyed. Then two years ago Howie Middleton had died. And the will he left broke an old promise. "You'll own Mountain when I'm dead," Howie Middleton had said. Instead, he had left everything to that weak-spined nephew in Chicago—a man whom Howie had visited once and come back to Arizona to report that the boy was cake frosting and lace drawers and about as tough and durable as a paper hat.

So if Randolph Middleton II was actually on Rifle Creek

as Rincon and later Walcott had claimed, then let him come to Mountain and fight for his possessions.

"Damned if I'll move off and give it to him," Kell said aloud. "Not unless it's better for Merry's sake," he added hopefully.

Charlie Penn and the Union-issue field glasses had reported yesterday that Ellenbert and four of the men from the Rimrock Saloon were at Rifle Creek. This was disquieting. So far Kell had been able to limit Rincon's hiring of men by putting the fear of death into everyone in town. And these men, in turn, would pass the word to any drifters who might happen by in search of work. Bad as a man might need a job he wasn't going to nail his own coffin shut for the few dollars Rifle Creek could pay.

And Charlie Penn had also seen through the field glasses, from a vantage point, Merry and a slim young man wearing a narrow-brimmed hat walking together hand in hand. From the first Kell had been attracted to the girl. But it was only when she had fled to the enemy camp that he realized how much he needed her.

Maybe he should clear out at that and take Merry. Hidden away was thirty thousand dollars in shiny gold coins, sacked and ready to be packed out. There were eight hundred head of cattle in the canyon. A good start for any man.

With Merry he could reorganize his life. And he could still have a son. Not the one that had been taken from him so long ago by the Campos—those dirty Mexican Campos. Oh, how he hated Mexicans, the sneaking, knife-sticking hellions!

In his hatred it never occurred to Kell that his own son, if the boy still lived, was part Mexican. Or if he did think of it, he would never allow himself to dwell upon the fact. Alive or dead the boy was gone as surely as if he rested in the place of the dead at Chihuahua City.

What would have happened that day, he asked himself for the thousandth time, if the Campos had caught up to him? Why was Maria with them? Did they intend to force him to marry? Or did they have her along so she could watch them shoot him to pieces for bringing disgrace upon the

family? It was one thing he would never know. The fact was she had died in the shooting. Anything else was conjecture.

Hearing the sound of riders coming, Kell went into the bunkhouse, got a rifle, and came out. The six men left at Mountain drifted out. How much he'd give right now to have that treacherous dog of an Ed Loren at his side.

Loren had been many things, but he could handle a gun. Or could until Rincon came along and made him look like a fool, shooting into his own leg, getting so rattled that he couldn't hit a rolling, floundering target on the ground that was the big Texan. And then Pap Walcott had finished things by running his rope into the sack and tying it up.

Before this was over he'd leave Pap's eyeballs for the buzzards. And he'd consign Duffy Rincon to the hottest corner of purgatory.

The riders came to the shelf and halted. Even at two hundred yards Kell knew the big one was Mike Casson. And you couldn't mistake the monkey-on-a-stick look of that no-good Billy Rooley.

Casson rode a little closer, lifted a big right hand in the sign of peace. At last Kell handed the rifle to one of his men, caught up the nearest horse, and rode toward the spot where Casson and Rooley waited.

"If Casson tries anything," Kell shouted at his men grouped in front of the bunkhouse, "shoot him to pieces and hang that Rooley upside down for the bobcats."

But he wondered, as he reined away, if any of the men would obey. He cursed himself again for being so cheap. If a man spent money, he could hire a crew, each man like Ed Loren—men who would be loyal as long as they had plenty of whisky money and cash for the girls on a Saturday night. Not the grub-line riders, the cowhands, the simpletons—the men who'd work for twenty-five a month and lick the mud off your boots and look as scared of him as they would of a ghost-ridden midnight.

Well, one thing for sure, Kell told himself, he wasn't afraid of Casson. Never had been and wasn't now. A man should just stay clear of that Greener the big man kept

behind his bar. And make sure Casson never got his hands on you.

He rode up within a dozen yards of the pair. He sat looking at them, right hand resting on his thigh, just a muscle twitch from his black-handled revolver. Waiting for Casson to offer the first word.

The big man had discarded the bandage on his head. But Rooley, Kell saw with satisfaction, still looked as if his face had been used to pound fence posts.

"I know where a fella can get hold of two hundred head of beef," Casson said in his rumbling voice.

"So."

"Rincon's makin' a drive to Fort Rogers."

"How you know?" Kell demanded suspiciously.

"Ellenbert told me."

"Ellenbert hates your guts."

Casson showed his white teeth. "A man forgets his hate when you got your foot in his face. He stopped by for a drink. I got him to talkin'."

Kell eyed Billy Rooley, then his gaze slid to Casson again. "My boys ain't had a decent meal since Walcott quit me. I'd like to fry Rooley for supper, but reckon he'd turn a man's insides poison green."

"You can't insult me," Rooley said. "Not when there's a dollar on the table waitin' to be picked up." He spoke with difficulty, for his lacerated lips had not yet healed.

"We figure we better work together, Kyle," Casson said. "It's the last battle, the last ditch like they said in the war."

"I ain't forgot that business with my sister-in-law."

"We was just funnin'," Casson said. "A man makes a joke. Sometimes it's a poor one. A man can say he's sorry."

"A damn poor joke," Kell said. He rubbed the stiff hairs on his chin. Well, he could use this pair, much as he disliked them. Use them for now, that is.

And besides a joke of his own was forming up in his mind. A joke on Suella, damn her!

Casson said, "Middleton is sure enough at Rifle Creek. A man might get ten, fifteen thousand dollars out of his skin. There must be somebody back in Chicago willin' to pay

that kind of money for Middleton to keep both ears. Course if they don't pay up right away we could send one ear and then the other."

"A man's got his name in his ear?" Kell scoffed. "How the hell would anybody know whose ear it was?"

Casson smiled. "We could send a note written by Middleton himself."

Rooley said, "That two hundred head of beef interests us right now. I know where we can sell it quick."

"We could stay here tonight," Casson said, "and pick up the herd tomorrow with your boys along. Rincon can't make more'n ten, twelve miles a day. We'll catch 'em easy."

Kell pondered Casson's eagerness to join him. But he tentatively agreed. He had business here tonight. Personal business. Merry should be coming along about sundown with Charlie Penn, if his calculations were correct. Kell forced a smile on Rooley. "You boys come up to the house and the missus will cook us somethin' to eat." Kell gave Rooley a long look. "I got a woman in mind that might be right good for your kind of business. We'll talk about it."

Kell turned his horse and rode back up the yard.

And Casson, when Kell was out of earshot, whispered, "We'll have our chance, don't worry. A knife at the throat and Kell will tell us where to dig up that money."

"What about his crew?"

"We'll shake them. We'll ride out of here, Billy, with enough gold to sink Lee's Ferry to the bottom of the river."

Chapter 22

DUFFY PUNISHED THE DUN when he finally came to the Mountain road and began to climb. He knew it was fool-hardy coming alone, but what else was a man to do? His concern for Merry's safety outweighed all other considerations. When he was a half-hour from the ranch he paused to consider his next move. So far as he knew there was only one entrance to Mountain from this side. The alternative was to swing north into the mountains where the shelf could be picked up, and then move back to headquarters. But he didn't have the time.

He had just started again, after letting his horse blow, when he heard riders coming down the steep road from the direction of Mountain. Ducking into some junipers, he drew his rifle and waited. Six riders appeared in a moment, moving slowly; part of Kell's crew at least.

When they were ten feet or so down the road Duffy suddenly came in behind them and said, "Don't reach for a gun. Then nobody will get hurt!"

The men drew up and looked back at the tall, grim Texan sitting his sweat-marked dun. He held a rifle on them.

"What you want, Rincon?" a fat red-faced man said.

"How many of you boys left at Mountain?"

The man laughed sourly and looked at his five companions. "The crew's been driftin' the last few days, Rincon. We're the last to go."

"You gave up on Kell all of a sudden," Duffy said suspiciously.

The man spat. "Any fella that'd kill a woman, Mex or not, ain't fit to work for."

"Is Merry Dunn at Mountain?"

"She come in a while ago with Charlie Penn."

Duffy licked the dust from his lips, eying the men, wondering just how far they could be trusted. One thing was settled at least! Merry was at Mountain and she had arrived with Charlie Penn. That meant Penn was evidently sticking with Kell, for he obviously wasn't with this bunch.

"If you boys are quitting Kell, you could come to work for Rifle Creek."

The spokesman for the group shook his head. "When the boss throwed in with Casson, that was what busted the rope so far as we're concerned."

"Casson?" Duffy showed his surprise.

The man said that Casson and Billy Rooley had come in over an hour ago. "I'll pay good money," Duffy said. "We're going to sell beef—"

"Ain't money enough to make us stay in this country. We got this one chance to get out with whole hides. We're takin' it. We don't trust Kell and we sure don't trust Casson. We don't aim to get caught in the squeeze."

Duffy started to say something about them being yellow-livered sons. Then he shoved the thought back in his mind. After all, who was he to call a man yellow? These were cowhands, not gunmen.

"You aim to let us go, Rincon?" the fat man said. "Or shoot us for tryin' to hang you the other day."

"Go on, clear out," Duffy said thinly. "There's two women at Mountain. But a woman's safety wouldn't mean anything to you boys."

The men weren't swayed. "We feel sorry for the wimmen-folks, but what can we do?"

"You can use a gun!"

"We ain't fightin' your fight, or Middleton's fight. Not for the wimmen. Not for anybody. We had enough."

Duffy let them go. They moved slowly down the slant into the shadows that already were thick along the valley floor. Kell had picked himself a fine crew when he hired that bunch, Duffy reflected. Pay short money and you get men short on guts.

When they were gone, he moved on up the road. Just below the shelf he left his horse in the junipers, then continued his

approach on Mountain headquarters afoot. His hands were slick on the rifle. He was facing long odds. He moved around behind the long bunkhouse, hearing no sounds from within. The men he had met on the road might be telling the truth, they might be lying. More men might be around. But what difference could a few more make, anyway? he thought glumly. Already the odds were bad enough: Kell, Casson, and Charlie Penn. And of course there was Billy Rooley, who might not be much good with a six-shooter in hand, but who could use a derringer at close range to blow out a man's spine.

He halted, put down the rifle, checked the loads in his revolver. He started on again, hugging the bunkhouse wall. Why hadn't he exterminated these lice long ago? Men like Kell and Casson and Billy Rooley? It wasn't murder to eliminate such men from the earth. It was a kindness to the rest of humanity.

He was passing a shed built of stout timbers when he heard a muffled pounding against the wall. He halted, lifting the rifle. From here he could not see the house. The pounding started up again.

He saw that the shed door built of two-by-twelves was held closed by a large padlock. "Who's in there?" Duffy said tensely.

There was no answer, just the pounding again.

The first thought that flashed through his mind was Merry. Perhaps Kell had bound and gagged her and left her inside. But was that logical? he asked himself. Kell had somehow forced his wife to write a note that would bring her sister up here. After going to all that trouble Kell would hardly lock Merry up.

Or maybe it was Suella in there. Maybe Kell had ridden off with Merry. If so, then where were Casson and Rooley?

"I can pry the lock off this door," Duffy said, his voice close to the wall. "But not until you tell me who you are." He had spotted a two-foot length of iron lying in the weeds a short distance away. Evidently it was the shaft of an old branding iron.

But there was no answer, just more of the muffled pound-

ing. "Here goes," he said, knowing he had to gamble. "Remember, whoever you are, I'll have a rifle on you!" He picked up the discarded bar of iron and came back to the shed.

The pounding was more insistent now. Not the heavy fist of a man, but light. Maybe, just maybe Merry was in there. Or Suella, who could tell him where Merry had gone. Or it might be a man, hoping Duffy would interpret the gentle pounding for the fist of a woman.

Well, there was nothing to do but try. He stood his rifle against the wall, inserted the iron bar into the hasp, and pried. And as nails screeched out of timbers the whole door suddenly bulged outward. The half-freed hasp and padlock went flying into his face, partially stunning him. He fell back, the heavy door, torn from its hinges, pinning him to the ground. He saw Mike Casson, looming big as a barn wall, erupt from the shed. And behind him was Billy Rooley, his pink shirt torn, his mouth bleeding again as if someone had struck him and reopened the old wounds. The little man's eyes were wild.

"Kill him, Mikel!" Rooley cried, and from his shirt sleeve dropped a derringer to fall into the small hand.

As Duffy rolled from under the fallen door, he got his gun loose. Casson, coming in, kicked it out of his hand. The stunning force of the swinging boot toe numbed his right arm from fingertips to shoulder.

Casson flung himself down, his great weight slamming Duffy back to the ground. Duffy got a mouthful of dust. They were rolling over and over, clawing, gouging. Rooley was squealing like a woman, jumping up and down a short distance away, brandishing the derringer.

"Outa the way, Mikel!" Rooley cried. "I got him, I got him!"

"I'll mangle him first!" Casson cried. "Then we'll go after Kell!"

As they struggled, Casson flattened Duffy, face down. Casson got a mighty forearm around his throat, squeezing the breath out of him. Duffy's vision was lanced with shooting white lines, and in a moment would come the blackness. Flat on the ground, Casson kneeling on him, levering on the forearm, drawing Duffy's head back.

Duffy put all his strength into a sudden desperate twisting motion that turned him sideways. And the pressure at his throat was so intense that it seemed his head would be torn free like a melon from a vine. But in that moment of twisting he struck back at Casson, who was now straddling him. His fist was flung like a lead ball straight at the groin. Casson grunted, fell forward, the leverage of the forearm slackening. With a mighty heave, Duffy scrabbled aside. But Casson, the momentary pain gone, came up at the same time.

They closed, slugging, and Duffy knew there was no point in trying for the scarred face. It was like sledging concrete. Casson came on, his eyes narrowed, sweat slick on his face.

"You're goin' to pay for that gun barrel across the head, Rincon," he gasped, and Duffy hit him in the stomach with his left. His knuckles grazed Casson's big brass belt buckle. Pain shot up his arm. His right hand was still partially numb from the kick Casson had given him.

The blow to the stomach did not stop Casson. He lunged in, trying for the eyes, long arms reaching for Duffy's face. Reluctantly Duffy gave ground. He knew if he didn't stop this lumbering giant there would be nothing left of him but a broken body, a skull kicked open by Casson's mighty boots.

And behind Casson, jumping up and down, screaming invective, was Billy Rooley and the derringer.

Casson rushed in. Duffy, in trying to get away, tripped over the fallen door. They came together, falling. Duffy slashed at Casson's face with raking fingers, missed the eyes and tore at the lower lip. Casson grunted, turned away. Duffy struck him on the nose with the point of an elbow.

"Hold him, Mikel!" Rooley screamed, and started to come in. Duffy knew Rooley's derringer could throw a ball that would kill as effectively as cannon.

But before Rooley could squeeze off his shot, Duffy and Casson staggered up at the same time, pounding each other about the face and body.

Duffy backed away from Rooley. Casson was after him. Duffy struck savagely with numbed right hand at the point of Casson's jaw. The big man's eyes fluttered, his knees sagged. But still he came on. His fingers groped for Duffy's

throat. And because of his superior reach Casson almost reached his target. But just in time Duffy whirled aside and struck him in the face.

Suddenly Casson dived headlong across the clearing to a weed patch where sunlight glinted on metal. And Duffy knew, with a freezing in his stomach, that Casson had seen a gun.

"I want him!" Casson screamed at Rooley, and rolled aside as he struck the weed patch. Casson came up with the gun he had kicked out of Duffy's hand earlier in the fight.

Because Duffy knew his only chance of combating this new menace was in getting possession of the derringer, he suddenly lunged at Rooley. The little man swung up the derringer. Before he could fire it Duffy caught him by the right wrist in a crushing grip. At the same time he pulled Rooley against him.

Casson fired. Rooley shuddered, sagged as the bullet intended for Duffy caught the little man belt high. Tearing the derringer free, Duffy wheeled. Casson was coming straight at him, a towering, enraged man with a gun. Duffy spun away from Rooley, who gave a whimper and dropped, bleeding, to the ground.

At the same moment Duffy flung out his left hand at the charging Casson. He knocked Casson's gun hand high. The impact triggered the revolver, the bullet thudding into the timbered wall of the shed.

In the same movement Duffy pivoted like a fencer, bringing in his right hand that held the derringer. The snout of the deadly little weapon struck Casson hard in the ribs. And the bullet it fired tore upward into the heart. Casson, dying on his feet, plunged down. Duffy had to skip out of the way to keep from being pinned against the ground by the lifeless giant. Casson spread his length, and in the space of a dozen heartbeats there was no movement left at all in his body.

Gasping for breath, his head ringing from the blows of Casson's fists, Duffy took a moment to recover. Then he limped over to Casson, freed the revolver from the big fingers. Cocking the weapon, he looked toward the house, waiting. But no one came.

Rooley was doubled up on the ground. Duffy limped over

and turned the little man on his back. "Where's Kell and the women?" he demanded.

Rooley moaned. He was clutching his stomach and Duffy knew that there was no chance at all for the little man. No chance at all. He sank down on his heels. "Talk, Rooley. Do one decent thing before you die. Where are the women?"

"Kell went sorta wild," Rooley gasped, "when his men quit on him. Then—then Mike Casson made a damn-fool play. Told Kell him and me was figurin' to get our hands on that money—But Kell had that crazy Charlie Penn at our backs. And the two of 'em herded us in the shed here. But they never found my derringer—"

"I asked you where the women are?"

"Kell made 'em go with him and Penn. They're goin' to dig up the money and light out."

"Which way?" Duffy demanded. "Which way?"

"I dunno," Rooley said, and his mouth sagged open. His eyes were also open, seeing nothing at all.

Trembling, Duffy got to his feet. And then he stiffened as he heard a sound.

Chapter 23

HE TURNED TOWARD THE HOUSE and saw Merry standing in the yard, looking pale as spring snow on the Ramparts. Her shirt was torn and there was a smudge of dirt across one cheek.

"I knew if anyone came," she said, her voice breaking a little, "it would be you."

He saw the wild fear in her eyes, and yet she did not flinch. She stood some thirty yards away, near the rear door of the house. And there seemed to be no one else around, and yet he knew there was.

Instinctively he knew she was being used as bait. His tired eyes searched every shadow, his ears strained for every sound.

Where was Kell? Where was Charlie Penn?

Duffy's mouth was dry. Maybe if he kept her talking he could spot them. Maybe.

"You shouldn't have come to Mountain," he said.

"My sister wrote me."

"You should have known it was a trick."

Merry nodded her dark head. "I was afraid Kyle would hurt her. I couldn't take a chance. I sent Randy Middleton to tell you."

"He did."

"Duffy," she said, "Kyle has Suella. He heard the shooting and made us come back on foot. He'll kill Suella, if you don't put down that revolver."

"I mean it, Rincon!" It was Kell's voice now, coming from some junipers over between the house and the corral. "I'll kill the woman sure as hell. Now you step out where I can see you."

It was Kell's mistake. Duffy realized then that Kell

couldn't see him, because Kell was beyond the shed. Out there in the junipers.

"Where's Charlie Penn?" Duffy said to Merry.

"He's working in behind you somewhere!"

"Shut up!" Kell shouted. "Rincon, get out here! I'll let you ride out, if you show yourself!"

"Ride out with a sock full of lead!" Duffy said, and tried to make his voice scornful.

Then he heard another sound along the bunkhouse wall—a man moving. The slow, hesitant steps of a scared man. Duffy suddenly wheeled for the shed wall and sprang along it. He came face to face with a white-faced Charlie Penn, who was trying desperately to recover from the shock of seeing the man he stalked. Penn lifted his rifle.

Duffy fired, and one leg went out from under the lank body. Penn screamed, the leg bending queerly. He fell across his rifle. And at the same moment Duffy was yelling, "Run, Merry! Run!"

And he realized then that coming into this space between the shed and the bunkhouse wall put him directly in Kell's range of vision.

Suella was crying, "No, Kyle, no!" And then there was the sound of a blow and a woman's muffled sob. If Suella had been clinging to Kell's gun arm, the man evidently was free of her now.

Even though her scream gave Duffy an instant in which to clear the crumpled body of Charlie Penn and try to reach shelter, it wasn't enough. A rifle hammered out of the junipers and Duffy felt the stunning blow in his right arm. He stood stupidly, then began caving a little. He saw his revolver slipping out of his right hand.

Even as he went to his knees he managed to reach over and retrieve the revolver with his left. Kell was racing forward now, beard pressed flat against his wild face by the rush of air about him. He had discarded the rifle and now whipped up a revolver.

"Just you, Rincon!" he cried, slowing a little. "Just you to finish, an' then Merry and me will be gone with a mule pack of gold—"

The clamps of pain and nausea closed down on Duffy, but desperately he fought off the urge to close his eyes and topple over on his side.

Kell fired again, and again he felt a blow. And he knew in a numbed shock of realization that this was the eternal end of it. Through the red haze of his vision he saw Kell marching in now, triumphant, lifting his revolver for the final smashing blow.

"Loren tried for your head!" Kell cried. "He missed. I won't!"

And Duffy let himself sag forward as the gun crashed. And he heard the air whip of its bullet passing above him. He knew then that Kell had been a fool; always shoot for the thickest part of a man's body to make sure. And the head is far from a substantial target. In this moment Duffy shouldered erect up the shed wall, pain tearing at him. And even this respite he knew was not enough.

But there was a screaming, black-haired savage that suddenly descended on Kell. And he was forced to throw up a forearm to keep his face from being raked from eye to jaw by clawing fingernails.

"Merry!" Duffy shouted, the fear a copper taste in his mouth, a copper thrust into his stomach. "Get away!"

The desperate fear was alive in him. And fear for her safety somehow triggered a last reserve in him so that he was able to push himself away from the shed wall.

Kell flung out a hand that caught Merry flush on the jaw. She dropped into the dust where she lay lifeless as mountain stone. With a cry of rage, Duffy lifted his gun as Kell brought his own weapon up. The guns crashed simultaneously. Duffy closed his eyes, expecting another wedge of pain to drive through him. But nothing happened; there was no augmenting the pain that already engulfed him. He looked down and saw a buttonhole-sized indentation in the center of Charlie Penn's forehead where Kell's last bullet had forever silenced the last man to stick with him.

Kell was still coming on, slower now. And the gun he held must have weighed more in his hand than the great hulk that

was a dead Mike Casson beyond the shed. Again Kell tried to lift the gun.

Kell stood a moment, weaving, the front of his shirt showing a minute opening through which the fluid of his life was pouring. To the end his senseless hatred excused it all. "You Mex!" he cried. "You redheaded Mex!"

And then the fluid reached his mouth and cut off all sound from him. He fell slowly, as if his ankles had suddenly withered away and left his topheavy body without support.

Duffy leaned against the shed wall. He couldn't move. He knew he was calling to Merry, but she didn't move. Suella came out of the junipers, her face still swollen from the beating her husband had given her the other night. Well, he would beat no more. She paused in her run toward Duffy to look down at Kyle Kell, lying like a great dust-covered bear in the yard.

Then she came on. "Here," she said, taking his elbow, "I'll help you to the house."

"Get Merry!"

"She isn't hurt. She'll be all right."

And he let her walk him to the house. When Suella was in the process of cutting off his shirt, Merry came in. And when Merry saw his torn right arm hanging loosely, and the other ugly furrow just under his left armpit, she came running.

Fighting back tears, she took the basin of hot water Suella had brought from the stove. She washed the arm and the other wound, saying nothing. But when the bandages were in place she broke down and wept.

Suella found one of Kell's cigars and lit it for Duffy. At last Merry ceased her sobbing and dried her eyes. "I guess I've had that coming for a long time," she said, her voice shaky. "I guess seeing you almost die brought out more tears than I thought I possessed."

"There are dead men in the yard," he said. "It isn't pretty. I'm a killer."

"I know now that whatever you've done is because you had to do it. Somebody had to do it."

He said around the cigar, "I'll get my breath and then ride down and get Middleton and send him up."

She shook her dark head. "Not for me, Duffy. Don't get him for me."

"You're going to marry him."

"No. Not even if you don't ask me to be your wife."

"But—"

"I know he doesn't belong in this country. He's not strong—like us."

Suella came up and looked at Duffy. She seemed tired, drawn, and yet there was a certain relief in her eyes. "I intended to kill my husband after I wrote that letter to Merry. But—" She told him how Kell had unloaded the revolver she had hidden.

"It doesn't matter now," Duffy said.

"There's a lot of gold not a quarter of a mile from here," Merry said. "Kyle was digging for it when he heard the shooting."

There was the sudden sound of horses coming at a hard run. Warning the two women to silence, Duffy picked up a gun with his left hand and limped to the door. Coming across the yard at a gallop were Pap Walcott, Hickam, and Randolph Middleton II.

"We come quick as we could," Pap Walcott said. "Some shootin', Rincon," he added. He and the others had seen the carnage in the yard.

Middleton seemed unusually subdued when he saw Merry moving to Duffy's side at the big spur-scarred table.

"I guess you should have spoken up for yourself with Merry," Middleton said gravely. "All she ever talked about when we were together was you."

Duffy said nothing to that. "You've got your gold," he said. "All you have to do is finish digging it up."

Middleton looked down at his clenched hands. "I'm not going back to Chicago"—he glanced at Merry—"no matter what has happened. I— Duffy, my uncle Howie ran Rifle Creek. I want to take over there. Will you show me how? And at the same time run Mountain?"

"I had sort of figured on Texas, maybe—"

"You've got a contract with me," Middleton reminded. "Be-

sides," he added with a forced smile, "I think your wife would rather be here than in Texas."

"Nothing wrong with Texas," Duffy said. He glanced at Merry, who was watching him.

"Wherever you say, Duffy. It's your life I want to share. No matter where."

A trace of bitterness touched Suella's eyes when she saw the way Merry and this Duffy Rincon were looking at each other. She got up from the table. "Well, whatever you decide, it looks as if Merry doesn't need me any longer."

"You're welcome to stay here," Duffy said.

She shook her head. And then Middleton spoke up. "Pap Walcott tells me my uncle promised to leave Mountain here to Kell. Under those circumstances I should do something for his widow."

"You owe me nothing," Suella flashed. "I've always taken care of myself."

"Pap says there should be roughly thirty thousand dollars buried by your husband. Your late husband. That money will more than get these two ranches on a paying basis again. I—I would like you to accept ten thousand dollars."

"That's more money than I'm worth," Suella said, shocked by the offer. "More money than any human is worth." In the silence that followed Suella looked again at Duffy. Then she said to Middleton, her voice calm now, "I suppose I should have some compensation for losing so much. Not my husband," she put in hastily, and her gaze flicked again to Duffy, "but other things. I accept, Mr. Middleton."

The men went out to take care of the grave digging. And after a moment Suella stepped outside, to leave Duffy alone with the girl.

"Middleton was generous with your sister," he said.

"Suella can make up for some of the things she's missed." Merry added gravely, "I have a feeling she'd trade that money to be in my shoes."

Flushing, Duffy looked away. "You made up your mind awful quick about me."

"I guess I made up my mind about you the first time we met. But—well, I fought it. The night you learned I was go-

ing to be married, I saw the hurt on your face. And then I knew for sure you were what I wanted."

"But it took a gun fight, a killing, to bring it out?"

She ignored the bitterness. "You are a tall man, Duffy. And you've made some history in this country."

"I'm thirty years old. Have you ever considered that I'm a lot older than you are?"

"When I saw you so near to death today—" Her face lost color and she came and put herself in his lap, careful not to touch the right arm in the sling.

He closed his eyes and then opened them and looked around. "We'll get rid of these buffalo robes—"

"And put a stove in the bedroom."

"A big stove."

"Maybe first you should ask me to marry you," she said.

"I thought I had—in so many words."

He saw the gleam of her white teeth in the new evening. "Ask me with the right words."

And he did. The dreams he'd had for so long became clear again in his mind, and he felt that she was right. He had made history in this country. He'd make more. They'd make it together.

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